

# TRICK ISM At Length IV





**TREKisM**  
**At Length IV:**  
**A MATTER OF TIME**  
**BY LEE PHILLIPS**

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This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Dedicated to Leonard Nimoy, a Terran who  
in portraying an alien from the future  
with such charismatic mystique, inspired  
millions of words of love and adventure,

and to Richard, whose encouragement  
prompted me to finish the dream begun....



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There is a special thrill when a friend praises your work, and I was lucky enough to have several friends who urged me to seek publication of this novel. Since it was written by a fan for other fans, with encouragement by a few special fans, it is intended only for those who hunger for new adventures about Star Trek. As in all sincere acknowledgements, mention is given to others who contributed to the final product. And my first thank you goes to a very talented lady who offered to edit and publish my novel. A friend for several years through correspondence and association in other areas of writing, Vel Jaeger proved to be the final motivating force behind A Matter of Time. Without her valuable assistance the novel would still be on the shelf. In addition, there were: Rosemarie, who displayed heroic tact in reading my initial efforts and not throwing up; Kathleen, who bolstered my faint heart when I really needed it; and Gloria, who turned my tattered manuscript into readable condition. A word of sincere appreciation goes also to the creator of the world of Star Trek, Mr. Gene Roddenberry, whose ideas have given us countless hours of entertainment and discussion. Thank you, Dear Friends, may all of you live long and prosper!

LEE

A MATTER OF TIME has been my first experience in editing a full-length novel -- a task I approached with more than a little trepidation. It was a most pleasant surprise to discover that editing a novel is actually a simpler project that compiling an anthology of stories and poetry: there's only one author to deal with (and a very agreeable one, too), and only one artist (LaVena has to have the fastest pen alive, completing her assignment in barely a month!); there's only one plot to keep in mind, which eliminates the problem of balancing an anthology. In short, I was able to leap right into each phase of editing with enthusiasm. Would I do it again? You bet! Especially with this author.

That author and I jointly express our appreciation to our "staff" -- to Mike Koenigsberg for tireless hours spent putting our beastie in his computer and lovingly supervising the printout (though with the winter they've had in Minnesota, he couldn't get out much anyway -- through shoveling yet, Mike?); to Kim Knapp, my able assistant in the many mundane tasks associated with assembling a zine (she calls herself "Vel's Lackey", but I couldn't run the SIG without her); to local unsuspecting friends and Shatner Fellowship members who were coerced, er, collared, er, make that convinced to proofread: Pat Friedman, Karen Totino, and Lynda Johnson; and most especially to LaVena Kay Kidd, who evidently performed a 3-way mind meld twixt author's and editor's mental interpretations of the illustrations needed for this novel.

Lee →



## FOREWORD

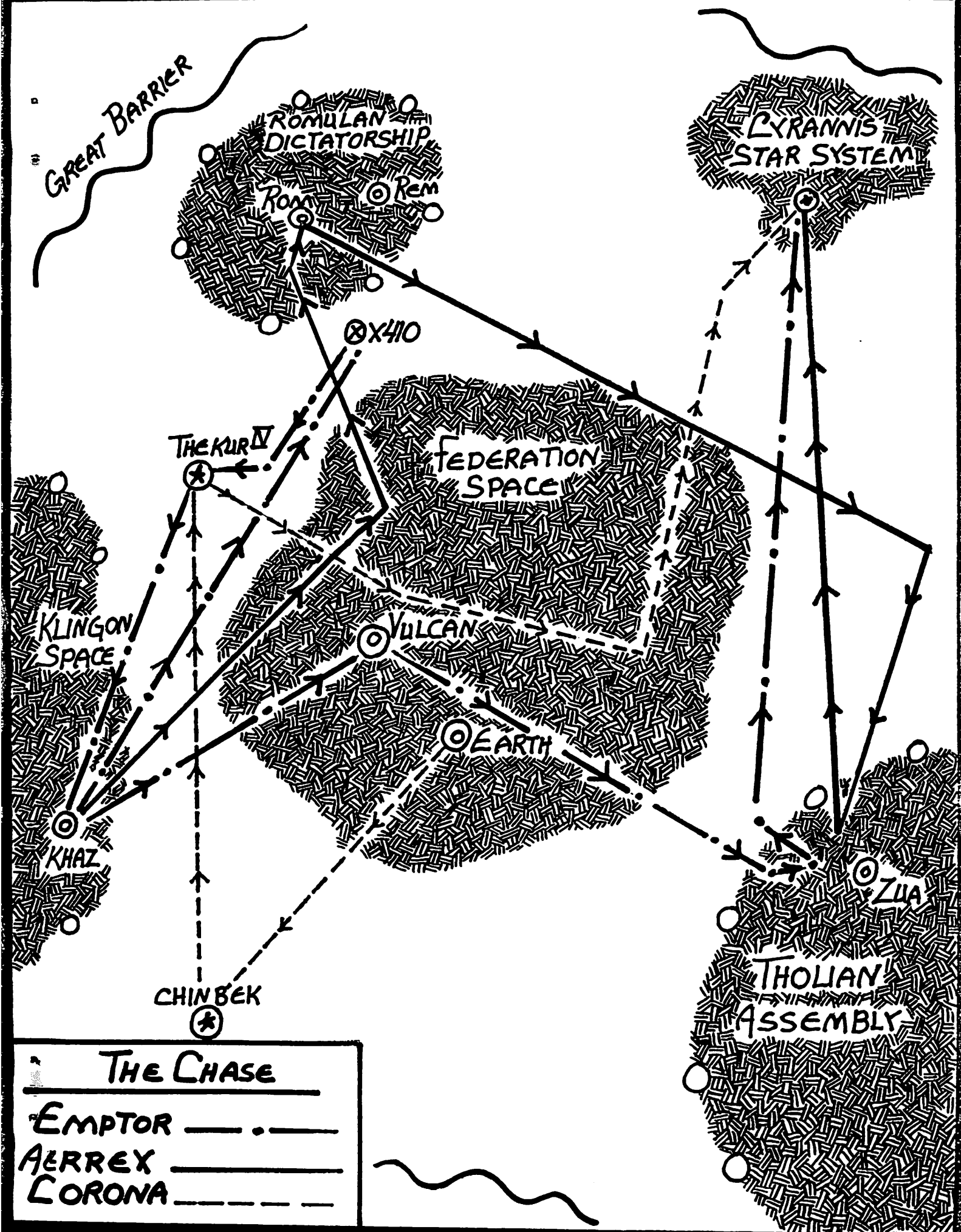
I cannot dispute my love of the world of Star Trek. Several years ago, after I'd discovered others with the same insatiable affliction, the idea for this story began to gel. However, putting it down on paper proved to be more difficult than I'd imagined, and at times I considered chucking the whole thing into the trash. Even after it had reached the final draft I put it on the shelf because I didn't feel it was good enough to offer to anyone else. Dealing with scientific and medical terminology, painting myself into corners that demanded constant rewriting, and limited writing experience had convinced me that it wasn't worth any more hours of struggle. What had begun as a short story had turned into an epic, and the monster had me by the throat!

A few nagging friends later, I'd plunged into more rewriting and editing and critiques and title changes and sleepless nights, all of which prompted (more than once) the question: "Why do Star Trek fans write?" There is no money, very little fame, and certainly less than desired response in most cases of fan writing. But the world of Star Trek seems to spawn more than its share of dedicated, thought-provoking material, and the fascination continues.

A Matter of Time is placed late in the final stages of the five-year mission of the Enterprise. It is an alternate universe story, having taken outline form between the releases of ST-TMP and ST-TWOK, and one of the chapters concerns the deaths of Sarek and Amanda. Convinced as to the improbability of future big screen episodes following ST-TMP, I developed my own conclusions as to the fate of the Federation and its various inhabitants. And since there seemed to be no clear-cut motivation for Spock's journey to Gol in ST-TMP, I concluded that it might have something to do with the end of the original five-year mission, and the loss of his parents. As it turns out, Sarek will be appearing in the next movie, Star Trek -- The Search for Spock. I am happy to find that he is alive and well, and hope that, perhaps, Amanda will also make an appearance some time in the future. Nevertheless, by the time I had learned about Sarek, AMOT had progressed beyond the point of rewriting the chapter concerning Spock's parents' deaths, and I chose to retain the idea in the story, placing the entire setting in an alternate universe. There are many others in fandom, and I hope the readers enjoy mine.

Peace.







For everything there is a season,  
and a time for every matter under heaven:  
a time to be born,  
and a time to die; ....  
...a time to kill, and a time to heal; ....  
...a time to love, and a time to hate; ...  
...a time for war, and a time for peace.

--Ecclesiastes 3

# CHAPTER I

## THE AMBUSH

Captain's Log: Stardate 5739.1

En route to Gamma 5 approaching the Delta Triangle in search of a missing research vessel, the Enterprise picked up a faint distress signal coming from the vicinity of Epsilon 2, one of the Federation outposts near the Klingon border. Only the coded words "attack" and "Klingon" were translatable due to unusually heavy ionic radiation in the area. But the urgency of the message was clearly established, as Lieutenant Uhura reported direct voice contact in the few seconds before transmission ceased. Since the words were garbled and indistinguishable, we can only surmise that Epsilon 2 is under attack by Klingons. Therefore, the Enterprise is changing course and proceeding at Warp 5 to assist in the defense of the outpost. We will notify Starbase 27 if additional help is needed.

The battle was barely begun before it was over and the starship, mortally wounded, floated aimlessly, countless officers and crew aboard her either dead or dying -- the response to the plea for assistance having been too little, too late. Epsilon 2 had been unable to contact the Enterprise with more than a fleeting call for help and by the time the starship had arrived, the outpost was virtually a flaming asteroid.

The Federation ship had been instantly bracketed by materializing Klingon warships, their invisibility screens deemed unnecessary in lieu of superior numbers. The surprise attack was too much for full defense screens, Star Fleet inspectors discovered much later, evidenced by simultaneous phaser blast devastation from five alien battlecruisers. The attack occurred during the change of watch when corridors and lifts had been busy dispersing crew members, and bodies had been strewn carelessly about the wreckage.

The red fog of emergency lighting made vision poor at best, but the stunned first officer gazed in horror at the destruction around him. He crawled to his feet, stumbled and fell, lifted himself to elbows and knees and began moving again. The bridge was a shambles of burning panels, its large forward viewscreen blackened and silent. The command chair had been ripped from its mooring during the thunderous blasts that had ravaged



the ship and had rendered her incapable of retaliation.

The Vulcan painstakingly examined each body, calling out a single name in frustration as he dragged himself through the chaos. A fit of paroxysmal coughing left him gasping in the smoke filled dimness, and he collapsed hopelessly near the jammed turbo-lift doors, the body of the man he sought lying grotesquesly tangled in a web of blown out computer panels beneath the science station.

With the destruction of the outpost confirmed, the Klingon warships hovered just within firing distance of the drifting starship. The commander of the largest cruiser, a dark, bearded figure of imposing stature, surveyed the motionless Federation vessel on his viewscreen. Gloating with this victory, he rubbed his hands savagely, smiling in malevolent satisfaction.

"The starship is destroyed! No more will we be hampered by that meddling Earther of a captain and his invincible scow -- he has interfered once too often. In the name of the Klingon Empire, I claim this sector of space and defy anyone else to take it from us!"

Kalauq shook his head imperiously at his subordinates.

"We will deal with protests later -- by the time the Federation understands what has happened, we will have established a new Klingon outpost! Communications officer! Dispatch a formal claim to the Federation's Starfleet headquarters."

Then as an afterthought, "Better yet, tell them to come pick up their damaged starship. We do not clutter our regions of space with debris. I will allow one salvage vessel into the area to tow away the wreckage -- and what's left of the crew -- back to where it came from." He smiled archly at the other officers and cut short the inevitable admonishment from his second-in-command.

"We have no need of captured vessels, Sub-commander," he asserted condescendingly. "The ship is of old design anyway, and we would learn nothing new from it. It would be a waste of precious fuel to dispose of it properly."

Kalauq studied the screen thoughtfully.

"Besides," he continued confidently, "let them see what power the Klingon fleet can inflict on their mighty starships. It may make them just a bit more respectful in the future!"

With that final observation the Klingon commander lapsed into silence. Not given to daydreaming as a rule, he nevertheless enjoyed imaginary acclaim that would follow the news of his most recent conquest. Kalauq's reputation had become synonymous with iron-handed authority. Officers assigned to his ship quickly learned that above average performance was expected of them at all times and failure to measure up to those standards resulted in immediate transfer to lesser positions. Junior officers who had summarily been reassigned had been heard to mutter that death was preferable to serving under the notorious Commander Kalauq.

His ambitious exploits had become known throughout the galaxy. For several decades his notoriety had spread well beyond the Romulan and Federation environs. And his influence in the Klingon Empire had multiplied astonishingly as a result of his insatiable appetite for conquest. One premature accusation of cowardice had been deafened with a rejoinder that ultimately became his motto.

"It is not cowardly to be expedient, to be practical -- we cannot afford waste, either in time or resources! Let us take from the rich alliances, the



LAVENA KAY  
KIDD ©84



fools who think they can buy safety. Let others explore and find new realms to conquer -- we will take over when they have done the work! It is foolish to overextend one's strength, and exploration is both expensive and foolhardy. Our species once had its share of willful idealists but that is done with! We will rule the galaxy when others have exhausted themselves running after more indefensible boundaries!"

The Klingon sighed to himself in genuine elation. The recently acquired Romulan cloaking device had lacked proper testing and the Federation ship had strayed, conveniently, towards the targeted outpost as the Klingons initiated attack. The results had been most gratifying, suggesting new possibilities for Klingon expansion and conquest. Federation starships would now no longer pose a threat to liberated warship commanders.

One by one the other ships had retreated towards the safety of Klingon home space. But the group commander's vessel had remained, circling the disabled starship like an inquisitive vulture while its battle stations resumed standard attitudes, and its staff reviewed the successful experiment with satisfaction. The helm had subsequently been ordered to turn the ship towards home. But 'Kalauq countermanded with an unprecedented directive.

"There is a Vulcan aboard that ship, their first officer. I want him. Transport him over dead or alive -- he will be proof of our mission when we return home, and perhaps we can put his knowledge to good use if he survives the journey." He lifted his chin defiantly at the startled looks around the bridge.

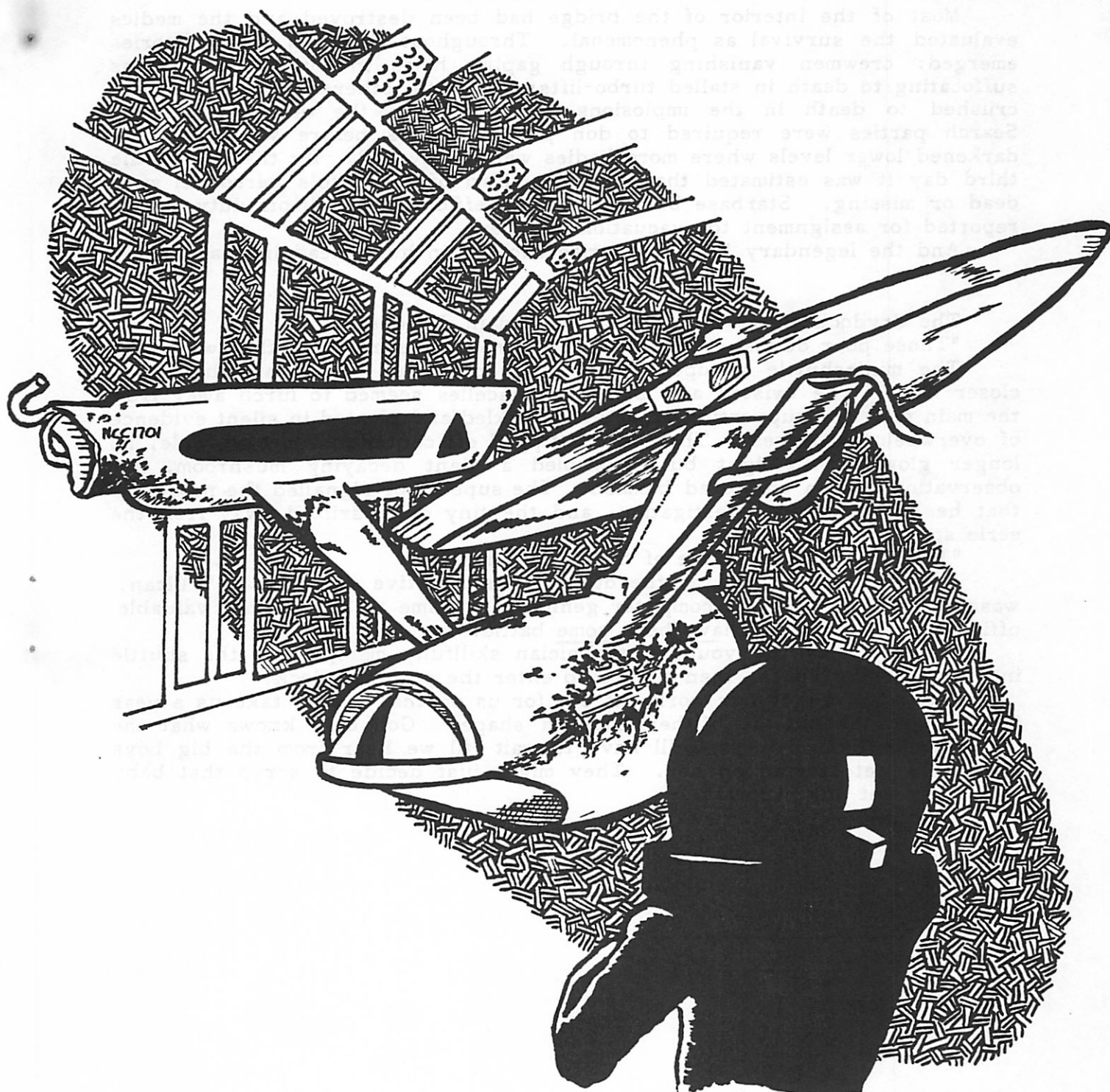
"Spoils of war, gentlemen; surely you are familiar with the term?" And turning back to his second-in-command he relinquished the con. "Sub-commander Krale: take over while I am in the transporter chamber inspecting my trophy!"

The tug moved at sublight speed towing the crippled starship, its battered exterior barely intact. Nearby, K-8 Deep Space Station staff relayed the ship's progress through holocom transmissions to Starbase 27, a young lieutenant on watch confirming the identity of the incoming double apparition on the sensors sweep. After breathing a long sigh of relief, he cued Communications to relay its approach to the large hospital complex at the starbase. Forewarned, supervisors directed all off-duty personnel to prepare for evacuation of the crippled vessel.

When the startling summons from the Klingon commander had been confirmed, the rescue tug quickly squeezed special emergency teams of doctors and nurses into the limited cargo space with first-aid equipment. These highly skilled teams would be transferred to the Enterprise to conduct lifesaving procedures and administer special treatment to several of the alien species aboard.

During the long haul back to the starbase the medics worked feverishly to keep surviving crew members alive, and although Sick Bay had been partially demolished, it was intact enough to use as a command center for search parties and to conduct emergency surgical and first-aid techniques. Dazed but ambulatory crew people were pressed into investigating the twisted wreckage for others who still lived.

The captain had been found, barely breathing, several hours after the tug arrived on the scene as rescuers' torches burned through to the isolated bridge. Dr. McCoy was discovered in a corridor outside Engineering, lying across the unconscious body of the chief engineer. The first officer was nowhere to be found, on the bridge or in his quarters, and it was surmised



Arena Kay  
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that he would turn up later somewhere else in the ship when a more thorough investigation could be made at the starbase drydock.

Most of the interior of the bridge had been destroyed and the medics evaluated the survival as phenomenal. Throughout the ship horror stories emerged: crewmen vanishing through gaping holes in bulkheads; dozens suffocating to death in stalled turbo-lifts; while still others had been literally crushed to death in the implosions resulting from the deadly crossfire. Search parties were required to don pressure suits before venturing into darkened lower levels where more bodies were recovered. By the end of the third day it was estimated that nearly a third of the ship's personnel were dead or missing. Starbase 27 hummed with efficiency as all off-duty medics reported for assignment to evacuation shuttles.

And the legendary USS Enterprise once again hung dead in space.

The drydock supervisor shook his head in disbelief.

"Those poor devils -- how did they manage to survive in that wreck?"

The mini-shuttle swooped below the gaping hull of the starship for a closer look. The twisted and blackened nacelles seemed to lurch away from the main pod, the supporting structures buckled and pleated in silent evidence of overwhelming forces. The saucer, tipped off center at a crazy angle, no longer glowed with light but resembled a giant decaying mushroom, her observation deck a shattered blemish. The supervisor signalled the navigator that he had finished investigation, and the tiny craft drifted away from the eerie spectre.

"They've found no trace of the first officer?"

He inclined his head at the other man's negative response. "Vulcan; wasn't he? Some kind of computer genius... Shame to lose such a valuable officer. But that must have been some battle!"

He waited as the younger technician skillfully manipulated the shuttle into the parking space, then turned to enter the outer air lock.

"Well, we've got our work cut out for us on that one -- take us a year just to get the outside of her back in shape. God only knows what the inside looks like. Guess we'll have to wait 'til we hear from the big boys before we get started on her. They might just decide to scrap that baby after they get our report!"

# CHAPTER 2

# SURVIVORS

He awoke in a darkened area, realization of his confinement dawning slowly and painfully. His head throbbed with a pulsating ache and in the dimness he could make out wiring suspended above him.

The mind sifter. I have been taken prisoner...Klingon...?

"Yes, Commander Spock," came the answer. "You have been claimed as a prize of war. And your treatment will depend on your cooperation." The disembodied voice seemed to be all around him and he shuddered in mental revulsion as the voice continued.

"We have been using the stimulating currents of the mind sifter to revive you. The doctors said you were on the verge of death when we beamed you aboard. I couldn't allow that, of course, until I had gained that information which I need to pursue my... mission."

"And what is your mission, Klingon?" He ground out the words despite tight control over the pain and anger surfacing as memory returned of a dying starship, blanketing his thoughts with terrible clarity. "Do not concern yourself with our plans, Vulcan -- you will perceive them soon enough." The voice softened almost conspiratorily. "In the meantime, make things easier on yourself by cooperating with us; interrogation will be that much more pleasant if you do."

His senses dizzy with the torment radiating from every bone in his body, Spock strained tentatively against the fetters that held him to the hard table only to realize the futility of trying to break free. A loud hum filled the room and he knew the force of the mind sifter had increased. White hot probes burned mercilessly into his mind, disorganizing his control with high-frequency sound waves that sent him spiraling down again into unconsciousness. Eagerly, he embraced the cold welcoming anonymity of suspended animation as his screaming nerves lapsed into distant images of bright colors. Escape into oblivion would be his only recourse until the Klingon captors tired of the game and abandoned attempts to break him.

I must resist...I am Vulcan.... I will not...provide them...any assistance.... Subjugation of the body can be endured...enslavement of the mind is death....

And the center of his essence plunged deeply into the depths of pre-birth existence.



The director of Klingon Experimental Research met with Kalauq after several renewed attempts to subdue the Vulcan prisoner had failed.

"He is stronger than anything we've had to deal with before. There can be endless efforts, of course, but in light of his continued resistance, I feel that only the personality modification process would be feasible. Such a procedure can efficiently rearrange his brain patterns so that you can at least make some use of his physical services, perhaps to train him for restricted servitude somewhere in the fleet."

Kalauq nodded thoughtfully. "And with no viable memory, he will be relatively harmless to everyone but the Federation...."

He admired the alien for his strength; the potential for intelligent loyalty and service must not be wasted by reducing him to the level of a vegetable with the mind sifter. This one had the tenacity of a leader, and with the proper conditioning might even be suitable for another purpose.... Yet, if the scheme failed, he could still be a valuable security to use in some great coup against the Federation.

"I may have use for this one," Kalauq mused softly. "Discontinue the mind sifter and let him rest for a few days. Then proceed with your memory reversal. I will have a new suggestion to make at that time."

The pain had receded to a bearable level, and Spock awoke in a small cubicle with one door, light streaming in from a tiny window near the ceiling. A low table near the metal cot where he lay held several bowls of what smelled like food. He listened breathlessly for sounds of activity outside the door and when nothing happened, rose stiffly to prowl the confines of his prison.

The walls radiated cold and he shivered briefly in the thin gown that comprised his only covering. He examined his arms and legs gingerly, relieved to find everything mending and healing over with scar tissue. Even during his intense concentration in withstanding the mind sifter, his body had rallied in self-repair and reconditioning. He'd been unduly concerned, he knew gratefully, that the double strain might weaken his ability to maintain sanity, but apparently he was no worse for the wear.

The greyish, sticky mess in the food bowls turned his stomach just to look at it, but the liquid in the tall jar had a soothing effect on his parched throat.

After detecting no harmful ingredients, he drank deeply and, his thirst adequately abated, he returned to the cot to attempt a healing trance.

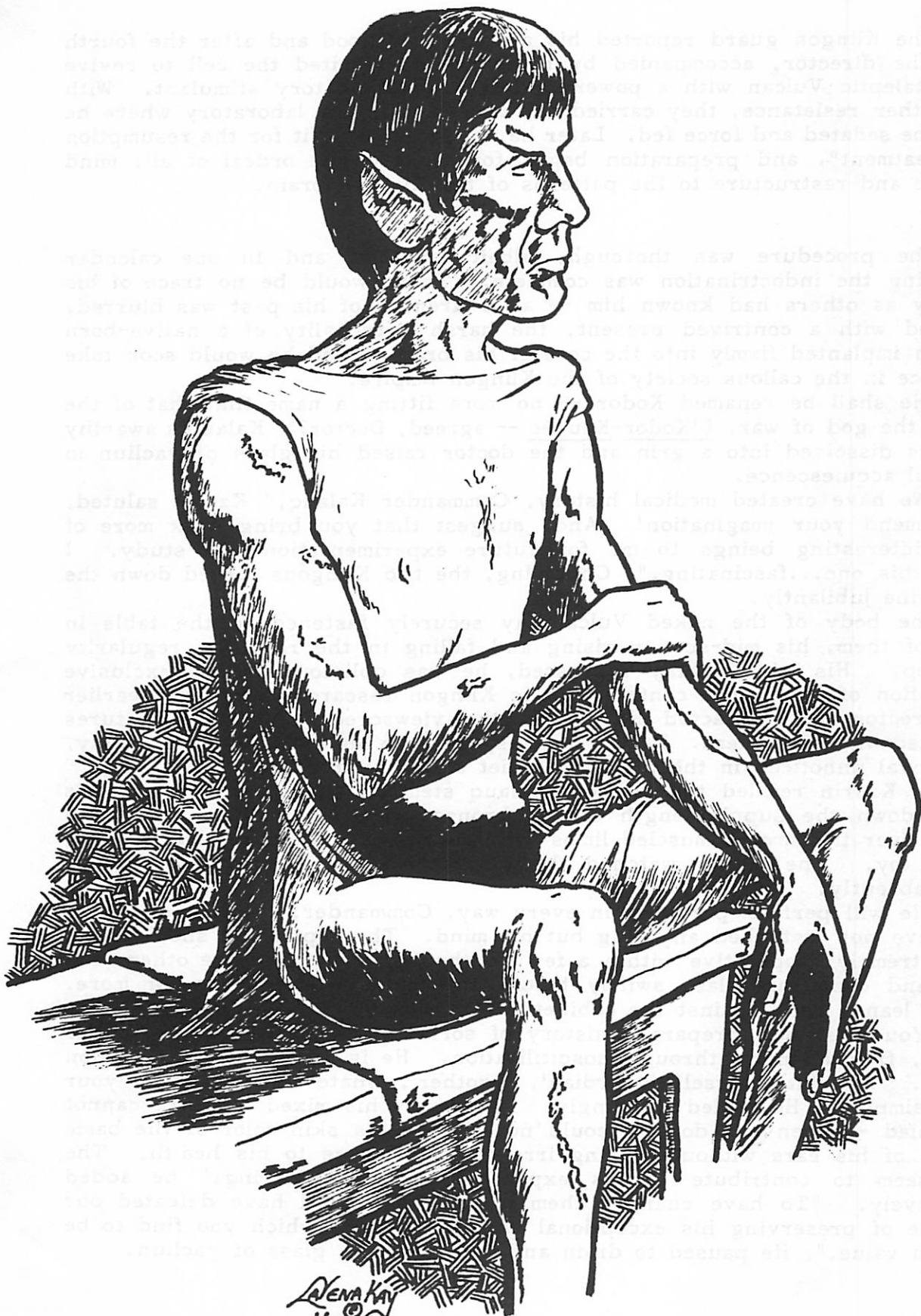
His mind would not shut down as easily as his body and disturbing memories returned to plague him.

What has become of the Enterprise? Why am I here? Where are Kirk and McCoy -- are they prisoners, too? And if they aren't...how do I find them?

He speculated endlessly with nothing on which to base an hypothesis until logic asserted itself predominantly, pleading patience. Time would be all he could afford in his precarious position; he must bargain for it until he could effectively determine an escape and search procedure.

He did not doubt that his enemies had plans that he could not perceive -- plans which might end in death and his never seeing his captain and friends again. The Enterprise must have been destroyed. In all probability, Jim and the rest were dead. But why wasn't he dead?

The uncertainty of it nagged at his already taxed thought processes until his defenses demanded rest, a lowering of his awareness to bare minimum. He slept fitfully, one recurring worry ravaging his subconscious relentlessly.



AKENAKI  
KIDO/84

### Where is Kirk?

The Klingon guard reported his avoidance of food and after the fourth day, the director, accompanied by three guards, visited the cell to revive the cataleptic Vulcan with a powerful dose of hallucinatory stimulant. With no further resistance, they carried him to a cage in the laboratory where he could be sedated and force fed. Later he was pronounced fit for the resumption of "treatment", and preparation began for the greatest ordeal of all: mind erasure and restructure to the patterns of the Klingon brain.

The procedure was thorough, albeit lengthy, and in one calendar reckoning the indoctrination was complete. There would be no trace of his identity as others had known him -- all awareness of his past was blurred, replaced with a contrived present, the harsh personality of a native-born Klingon implanted firmly into the core of his brain. And he would soon take his place in the callous society of the Klingon Empire.

"He shall be renamed Kodor -- no more fitting a name than that of the son of the god of war, L'Kodor-Kauvee -- agreed, Doctor?" Kalauq's swarthy features dissolved into a grin and the doctor raised his glass of yacium in cheerful acquiescence.

"We have created medical history, Commander Kalauq," Kzarin saluted, "I commend your imagination! And, suggest that you bring back more of these interesting beings to me for future experimentation and study. I found this one...fascinating." Chuckling, the two Klingons tossed down the fiery wine jubilantly.

The body of the naked Vulcan lay securely fastened to the table in front of them, his mid-section rising and falling in the rhythmic regularity of sleep. His mind totally repressed, he was oblivious to the exclusive celebration of his recent contribution to Klingon research. Moments earlier the director had contacted Kalauq on the viewscreen, his dark features contorted with excitement. Kalauq had responded to his invitation immediately, his arrival unnoticed in the pre-dawn quiet of the surrounding city.

As Kzarin refilled the glasses, Kalauq stemmed the impulse to run his hands down the supple length of the bronze body before them, his eyes roving over the smooth, muscled limbs with the delight of a small child viewing a new toy. The doctor watched the warrior with amusement, sipping his drink absently.

"He will perform perfectly in every way, Commander," he purred drily. "We have not disturbed anything but his mind. The imprinting should make him extremely cooperative within a few months." He watched the other turn away and drain his glass swiftly before returning to the bottle for more. Kzarin leaned back against the cabinet behind him.

"You must now prepare a history of sorts for the patient, Commander Kalauq, from adoption through hospitalization. He is no longer a Federation Vulcan. Appoint yourself 'guardian', 'brother', whatever...but keep your story simple." He smiled knowingly. "Obviously his mixed ancestry cannot be denied -- even our doctors could not change his skin color or the basic outline of his ears without causing irreversible damage to his health. The ears seem to contribute to his expanded sense of hearing," he added reflectively. "To have changed them in any way would have defeated our purpose of preserving his exceptional physical abilities which you find to be of such value." He paused to drain and refill his own glass of yacium.

In a startling gesture of modesty, Kalauq grabbed a folded coverlet from an adjacent table and draped it carefully over the nude body of the Vulcan.

"Tomorrow we will introduce ourselves to him, Director Kzurin. Until then let him sleep peacefully. He will have little peace from now on." The heavily built Klingon stared meaningfully at the doctor, nodding impatiently towards the door, and soundlessly, they left the slumbering Vulcan to the quiet of the laboratory.

Kalauq stroked his graying beard thoughtfully as he turned to the window overlooking the vast military maze below. The months-long secret would soon be a matter of fact, since Kodor's history had been accepted without question in the Bureau of Citizen Registration. The fabrication had been easy to invent: an alien youth captured on a remote space outpost, brought to Kalauq's mountain home and trained in the ways of the fierce tribesmen of the rugged north. He had been shielded from prying eyes and until the death of Kalauq's parents, had known only the companionship of family members.

When Kalauq had assumed the patriarchal duties of his father, Kodor's future had been uncertain. Kalauq's increased absence following his indenture into military service had relegated his kinsman to a hermit-like existence. And following a hunting accident in which a severe blow to the head resulted in amnesia, Kalauq had been forced to bring him to the city for treatment with the decision to keep him there indefinitely.

"The deception is fool-proof -- he is completely mine now --" the Klingon warrior gloated to himself softly, "only a few more tasks to finish the circle and there will be no evidence to prove otherwise."

The difficulty of disposing with those others who knew of Kodor's true origin was also relatively simple in the often violent political intrigues of Klingon society. Mysterious disappearances were accepted as a way of life, and banishment to remote outposts -- with intimations of other more unpleasant fates as alternatives -- was enough to buy silence in most cases. As for the doctors and guards of the research establishment, their own lives were governed by a terror of the very institution in which they worked. Secrecy and fear were common facets of the Klingon environment, and Kalauq slept well most nights with that comforting immunity on his side.

Kzurin, on the other hand, had gained more than adequate payment for his silence. Vulcan psycho/physiological knowledge was almost nonexistent until Kalauq brought them a healthy specimen to study. Detailed scans of the prisoner's body and mind had provided evidence of alien superiority that spawned new consideration of crossbreed mutations. Kzurin's past experiments in genetic biology had previously ended in frustration. Captured specimens usually arrived at his laboratory in the final spasms of death followed by rapid deterioration of tissues and nerves, making it impossible to secure viable samples for his theories. Now he would have an unlimited supply of genes and chromosomes to play with and if success resulted, unlimited power with the Imperial Council as well.

Kalauq's destruction of the Federation starship had brought him much favor with the ruling council, but loud praise of his exploits overshadowed his curiously subdued jubilation in the days that followed. His frequent visits to the research center went unnoticed since he had often expressed interest in scientific exploration. And it was further suspected that pre-occupation with his kinsman's unfortunate problem had caused uncharacteristic behavior in the customarily loud, overbearing warrior.



As his treatments became fewer and farther between, Kodor was moved to the rehabilitation wing of a nearby hospital where he soon became an object of interest to everyone who came in contact with him. Most of the other convalescents were elderly Klingons with relatively minor complaints, which made any lasting relationships impossible since the majority of patients entered and were discharged in a very short time. The days passed slowly for Kodor and after a while he even began looking forward to his brother's visits and the periodic examinations by Dr. Kzurin. As Kodor became more acclimated to hospital routine, he evinced an interest in historical material of military subjects, tapes of which were provided in the hospital activities room. Kalauq encouraged this interest openly, providing additional tapes of Klingon battle vessels and historical texts on strategy and defense technology. It was not long before the patient could speak intelligently with his sponsor on most of the aspects of Klingon space exploration.

In the meantime Kalauq had been courting members of the ruling council with flagrant promises of conquering new territory. He'd introduced his ideas to the council gradually, at the same time alluding to his foster brother's potential as a formidable and dedicated warrior. The council regarded Kalauq's proposals with caution. However, the Empire had not expanded for many generations, while the population had grown steadily. True, there were still vast unpopulated areas on Khaz and other planets within empire boundaries that remained relatively undeveloped. But the underlying Klingon philosophy passed down from father to son had always embraced conquest rather than expansion and cultivation of home space, Klingon warriors preferring the glory of battle to the expense and labor of cultivation of their native soil.

Kalauq's popularity won him many friends on the council and the more entrenched War Department board. It was only logical that he should advance quickly among those who appreciated his military abilities, and before long, he had been nominated to the newly created office of Supreme Warrior of the War Department, holding absolute power over all major divisions of military strength in the Klingon Empire.

Talk of new research activity by Dr. Kzurin filtered into government levels during this time. Kalauq pretended unconcern, inquiring politely when it was expected of him, otherwise feigning ignorance of any knowledge of the project. His ambitions to achieve permanent control of military operations must not be threatened by any controversial association with Kzurin.

Kalauq celebrated his promotion to chief of the military privately that evening. His male servant had laid a fire in the study and placed Kalauq's favorite brand of smuggled Saurian brandy by his favorite chair. By the time the bottle had been emptied, Kalauq toasted the portrait over the mantel many times, pacing the confines of the room with a brooding triumph. His visions of holding complete power over the Empire were coming to fruition, and he knew that once he had become a member of the Imperial Council he would soon hold the fate of the Federation in his hands. The Vulcan was indeed a trophy and he had given the alien back his life in exchange for something even greater. The price was insignificant against the opportunity to begin his crusade. The enemy would soon be defeated by one of its own, and the old boundaries that had held Klingon progress in check for centuries would be pushed back. The galaxy would soon be his for the taking!

The patient's blue eyes blazed with indignation.

"Doctor, when are you going to release me? I feel fine! And I have more to do than sit around in your medical hotel waiting for old age to creep up on me!"

"Calm down, Leonard, I want to do some additional tests before I release you. I must say, you haven't changed a bit, still the impatient, cantankerous GP that I interned with -- how long ago was it?" The tall, graying physician smiled ruefully, holding his patient's wrist expertly between his fingers. "And if you don't calm down, I'm going to keep you here on grounds of high blood pressure!"

"All right, Gordon, I'll be good." Leonard McCoy slumped back into the wicker chair and gazed out over the terraced gardens that lay beyond the sunporch. He'd become very familiar with them over the past few weeks while walking the porch to stretch his legs and breathe in the warm, clean air that reminded him of April in Atlanta.

"But no one will tell me anything," he grumbled plaintively, "about what's going on outside of this place. I feel as though I've been locked up for years instead of months. How long has it been?"

"Actually six months and fifteen days, Leonard. And I personally cautioned the attendants not to upset you by relaying news of galactic events. I can't have my patients fretting unnecessarily when they're supposed to be concentrating on getting well!" The man in the white jacket leaned back reflectively, cocking his head at McCoy's gentle scowl. He knew only too well how the other man felt, too much spare time weighed heavily on any active man's nerves.

"If you behave yourself, I'll have you out of here in a few days. Keep complaining, and it will be another month." He returned McCoy's smile of relief with an amiable nod. "I mean it, Leonard, you've got to let those lungs heal completely. Once you leave here, you'll be on your own, and I'd have one hell of a time getting you back. I'm not going to release you until I'm sure you're going to be okay."

McCoy closed his eyes and crossed his hands over his chest.

"One last request, Dr. Paulson: are you going to fill me in on the condition of my former shipmates before I leave here, or do I have to pry that information out of you, too?"

The other man was quiet for a moment, then facing his patient squarely, responded carefully in measured tones.

"It's a heavy load, Leonard, keeping bad news from an old friend, especially one who's recovering from a nearly fatal injury."

"How bad --?" The blue eyes blinked apprehensively, suddenly alert and watchful.

The man in the white jacket held up his hand defensively to stem the emotional agitation of his patient, and dropped down onto a chair beside him.

"You were critical when they brought you in. I kept you in Intensive Care for two weeks just to keep you alive. There was no alternative but to isolate you from anything that might upset the delicate balance of your condition. And that included news of your ship. Do you remember anything at all about that battle or how serious the skirmish was?"

The former ship's surgeon swallowed nervously and looked away before answering, deeply shaken by the intimation of disaster.

"Yes, I remember...some of it. I was in Engineering, in response to a call by our chief engineer." He faltered at the memory of Scott.

Paulson touched his shoulder gently in sympathy. McCoy had not said one word to anyone about the catastrophe, and the other had worried about the eventual realization of the outcome of the Klingon attack.

"I was in Engineering -- Scotty had called me about a crewman who'd fainted, and I was going to examine him before moving him to Sick Bay. I was walking through the manual control section when it happened, and the

next thing I knew the lights had gone out and everything was in shambles. Scotty had been standing near a stack of cannisters on the other side of the room and I had started towards him when we were hit. Apparently, one of the cannisters had been leaking the acid that they use to lubricate the dilithium crystals during the warp speeds -- it's a very corrosive compound -- and the fumes can overpower a man in minutes. When the ship rolled, the stack of cannisters collapsed on Scotty and the leaking cannister broke open.

"I couldn't find him at first and when the emergency lighting came on another engineering technician and I dragged the wounded into the corridor. Then I went back to search for Scotty. The fumes were getting bad and it was hard to breathe, but I knew Scotty was somewhere near those drums, so I started pulling at the pile until I found him. I barely got him out of there. He had been protected by the other cannisters and hadn't been affected by the fumes, but I knew that if I didn't get him out of there we were both dead men!

"I dragged him to the corridor and managed to slam the hatch closed to seal off the fumes, and then I passed out. A few hours later I woke up in Sick Bay -- or what was left of Sick Bay -- and sometime after that, again here on Starbase 27." He subsided into silence, shading his eyes with one hand to hide the foreboding in them.

"And now you're telling me there is more...even worse...."

"I'm not pulling punches, Leonard; I know you'd do the same for me. I have been greatly encouraged by your progress in the past few weeks, and feel you're strong enough to hear the truth. Monday you can visit Medical Records and review your captain's case, and after that I want you to report to my office. In the meantime, there is nothing further you can do to change the sequence of past events, and I want you to rest. I'll leave an order for a sleeping dose in case you require one." Paulson rose to leave, patting his patient on the shoulder comfortingly, his face grim with concern.

McCoy shook his head resignedly. "I've been in the dark this long, guess a few more days won't make any great difference. Thank you, Gordon; see you Monday."

He gazed somberly out over the gardens as the tall man turned and walked quickly back into the hospital.

The Medical Records Librarian had been very helpful. Because of special status as Kirk's previous attending physician, McCoy was given unlimited access to the starship captain's file. After signing out the tapes, the young attendant had shown him to a private viewing cubicle and explained how to operate the computer search and replay controls that would place any part of his former patient's file on the screen in seconds. He thanked her briefly and settled himself in front of the machine apprehensively.

The outpatient admitting history and prelim diagnoses were sketchy, and he skipped over them to advance to the detailed read-outs of emergency surgery and routine lab tests. Daily reports of progress were typical until the comment "no change" began cropping up more frequently. Nurse's notes were even less illuminating and McCoy switched to the last tape hurriedly and advanced it to the discharge entry and prognosis.

He sat very still for several moments, the light from the viewing screen outlining his shocked features with cruel delineation. Weakly, he touched the switch to "repeat", clenching his hand awkwardly to halt the trembling as he began reading again.

"Final Diagnosis: Total loss of vision, peripheral and anterior with no reaction to light or movement, accompanied by paralytic strabismus. Probable cause: trauma induced by severe blows to the head resulting in blockage of the optic nerve, possibly by the formation of a blood clot or other cell tissue damage. Recommendation: Bed rest with application of intravenous tynqualescaline for reduction of swelling and blockage, and continued observation. If strabismus has not receded in a reasonable length of time, ultrasonic laser procedure may be necessary to correct the deviation before atrophy of the optic nerve results. Prognosis: Guarded."

There were other lesser summaries concerning closed lacerations, shrinking contusions and mending broken bones including one green-stick fracture of the femur. But McCoy passed over them with negligible interest, noting that everything had healed consistently during the months of hospitalization, and that there had been a lessening of the paralytic strabismus. Still, Kirk had not regained sight. The last notation leaped out from the screen and McCoy swore softly to himself.

"Discharged conditionally to Rehabilitation Center on Starbase 12 for restricted neurological observation and psychiatric regimen."

He activated the instant rewind again and watched the tape identification code sequence fade from the screen.

Psychiatric regimen, indeed! Who do they think they're dealing with -- a boot fresh out of the academy? Jim Kirk is a veteran who cut his teeth on life and death confrontations in countless galactic skirmishes. And aside from one incident when his personality had literally been split in half, he'd never exhibited any irregularities as far as his mental health had been concerned! Yet they dismissed him to a psychiatric program.

Mentally, he reviewed the discharge examination: "No evidence of physical damage to the globes nor to the optic nerves; no evidence of blood clots..." The doctors had been stymied by Jim's visual dysfunction and had written off his condition as psychological trauma!

Hogwash! Jim wouldn't let a little fight -- McCoy's indignant reaction sputtered out in confusion. Wait a minute...How bad was the fight...what had really happened?

He'd been out of touch for more than six months with no news of the ship or crew. Why hadn't he demanded to know what was going on? Gordon had intimated there was more, and Gordon was going to tell him -- now!

But Gordon had been unavailable, something about an emergency on the other side of the starbase, the receptionist related kindly, and McCoy returned to his room with anxious dread. He would go back in the morning but he wondered how he could make it through the night without dissolving into frustration.

The receptionist was apologetic the next morning as she ushered the apprehensive McCoy into the large office. Paulson had been momentarily delayed, and McCoy paced impatiently, studying the shelves of antique reference which ranged from alien childbirth complications to experimental psychoborotic surgery.

Well, well, old Gordon has really arrived! Plush office in a large hospital with the latest equipment, no local bureaucrats to bug him about expense or waste.

He perched nervously on the edge of a deeply padded chair to wait. It must be pretty bad for Gordon to have kept it from me this long. Fine starship material I am -- first time I find myself banged up and hospitalized



I forget to inquire about my former charges! But Gordon wouldn't have told me anyway....

He turned at the sound of the office door swishing open and watched the tall man walk swiftly over to his desk to clear aside some tapes and press a button on the intercom.

"Ms. Kent, no calls for awhile. I don't want to be disturbed until Dr. McCoy leaves. Thank you." He seated himself with a weary sigh and leaned back to stare at his fidgeting guest.

"I'm sorry to have put you through this, Leonard. I knew I'd have to tell you sooner or later, but I didn't want to make you any more uncomfortable than you already were. We thought we were going to lose you for a time, but that stubborn Irish blood was stronger than we'd hoped...." Paulson smiled lamely and hurried on.

"Seriously, old friend, it was a ticklish situation for a while and I did the best I could to pull you through. I found myself wondering what you'd have done had the roles been reversed."

McCoy's mouth was dry and the words came out slowly.

"I'd probably have done the same, Gordon. And thank you -- you know I'm grateful! But that doesn't alter the fact that I'm still in the dark as to the disposition of the rest of the Enterprise personnel. I don't blame you; I blame myself for not demanding the truth, especially about...the captain. Now I'm asking you to give it to me straight. What has happened to everyone? "

Paulson picked up a report from his desk, glanced at it to confirm the contents and handed it to McCoy.

"This came in while you were still in Intensive Care. I held it up because I knew you and Captain Kirk were in no condition to deal with it at that time. The report was given to your captain shortly before he left for the rehabilitation center because Starfleet Command insisted. I didn't think it was a wise decision, but it was out of my hands since Kirk was still officially the commanding officer."

Silently, McCoy reached for the report and glanced down at it. The lead-in was addressed to the commanding personnel of the USS Enterprise and as his eyes followed the printed words down the page, his jaw tightened grimly.

"One-third of the crew killed outright; twenty bodies remain unrecovered."

A list of names ran down the page, and he scanned them dutifully, his face darkening with sorrow.

"Johnson, Rand, Riley...." His eyes blurring helplessly, he gasped at the names at the end of the list:

"M'Benga, Lieutenant, C.C., Assistant Medical Officer: M.I.A.; Spock, Lieutenant Commander, Science Division, First Officer: M.I.A...."

He'd stumbled from the chair, blindly, to stand near the big window behind the desk, the tears running unchecked down his face. And staring into the milky haze that passed for sunshine, was emptied of hope that he would awaken safely in the seclusion of his office just off Sick Bay.

This is really happening -- I'm here, in the office of the Director of Medical Services on Starbase 27, and my life will never seem normal again! Fumbling for a handkerchief, he mopped his face dispiritedly. The news must have hit Kirk especially hard. Those were his people, his ship! Starship crewpeople are trained to accept the dangers they encounter; but when the unexpected happened, how prepared were they?

The more immediate implications of the disaster dawned painfully. Kirk,

wherever he is by now, must be suffering....

Still badly shaken, McCoy returned to his seat, taking up the report where he'd paused. The next page dealt with the disposition of the ship.

"The Enterprise, in structurally unsafe condition, will be held in drydock until a decision can be made as to whether to restore her to duty or assign her to scrap...."

McCoy sighed, rubbing his forehead distractedly as he read further. Engineering had literally been blown apart; the saucer had been partially dislodged from the main structure and most of the decks sustained extensive damage to bulkheads, communications and energy systems.

She's a derelict, by every definition of the word, and her fate depends on a group of men who regard her only with militarily reserved respect at best. McCoy wiped his eyes and blew his nose, glancing up finally at the watchful Paulson.

"It's about as bad as it could get, I guess -- other than that all of us could have been vaporized or blown away." He shook his head bleakly. "It was wise on your part, Gordon, to have kept this from me -- especially about M'Benga and Spock. I'm very worried about the effect this had on Captain Kirk." Brokenly, he choked back the emotion that threatened his ability to speak.

"That bit of information may have tipped him over the edge. The Enterprise was his whole life, his home...my home...." He couldn't continue and they sat in silence for several moments. At length, McCoy straightened and pulled himself up from the chair resolutely.

"I have to find Kirk," he asserted sadly. "He probably needs a familiar face right now"-- McCoy caught himself, wondering if his former commander would be able to see his face, or even recognize his voice.

The two moved towards the door, the taller one comfortingly close to the other's distress.

"I knew I couldn't detain you much longer, Leonard -- that's why I tried to shield you from the unpleasantness of the whole thing. I still want to do a few more tests on you, but I'll issue orders for your release as soon as the studies are done." He found McCoy's hand and clasped it warmly. "It shouldn't take more than a week or so.

"Incidentally, if you ever need a job, remember you are always welcome here -- we need every doctor we can get and your diagnostic abilities would be put to good use."

McCoy nodded gratefully, shaking Paulson's hand firmly.

"Thank you, Gordon, I'll keep that in mind. But there's something else I have to do first."

"He's a very good friend of yours, isn't he?" the director queried astutely. "Sometimes a close friend can do more than all the hospitals put together."

McCoy hesitated, biting his lip reflectively.

"Gordon, there's a favor I'd like to ask...." He brightened at the other's quick nod.

"Anything, Leonard; I'll do what I can."

"I'm still officially attached to Starfleet, but I am going to Starbase 12 without orders to see if I can help Kirk. Perhaps you could...recommend sick leave for me? With the Enterprise out of commission it might be a bit sticky if I just pick up and go off on my own."

"Consider it done." The tall doctor smiled, patting his patient's shoulder confidently. "And you can remain on that status until you ask to be taken off of it. Your affiliation with the military is somewhat flexible, Leonard."

There won't be any problems. Go help Kirk!"

McCoy smiled his gratitude and hurried through the door. Before long he would be on his way to Starbase 12.

## CHAPTER 3

# THE REUNION

The starship captain had been lucky, medical skeptics later admitted; without the benefit of advanced micro-bionic surgery to repair his body he might not have survived. Later on they realized that it took more than repairs to ensure recovery -- it also entailed the will to live.

Kirk awakened briefly to the blackness that was complete and without relief. There were no chinks in it, no slits of light perceived between curtains, no shadowy movements in a dimly lit room -- only utter and absolute darkness. He'd been unconscious for weeks, kept alive by tubes carrying life-sustaining liquids as well as infection-fighting doses of anti-bio-viral drugs. His wounds had partially healed, forming scar tissue with textbook precision; bones had knit to perfection; according to his life function indicators, everything was in perfect working order -- except for his eyes.

When a circulating nurse noticed that Kirk was conscious, she had summoned the on-duty physician and the patient had been swiftly and efficiently examined. The complaint that he couldn't see anything at all, even light, had evoked no panic, only reassurances that the healing process was incomplete and that he would have to be patient. He was placed on a high protein diet and urged to exercise in bed to strengthen his leg and arm muscles towards the time he would get up and move about. But he'd ignored the orders contrarily, and after a few days the nurses gave up and hooked him to a portable muscle stimulator as a poor but necessary substitute.

At first the ophthalmologists were puzzled by his blindness, suggesting temporary hysteria to be the cause of his inability to perceive light and movement. Further investigation, however, revealed only slight swelling of brain tissue, and healthy optic nerves. The paralytic strabismus was still evident, but it exhibited definite signs of improvement. Drug therapy was initiated to specifically overcome the hysteria and restore the personality to normal; but after two months of unsuccessful experimentation, the doctors were forced to admit defeat. One last alternative was seized as Kirk's only hope -- transfer to a rehabilitation center where psychological treatment could be incorporated into his regimen.

Several weeks before, the arrival of a messenger from the office of the



Chief of Military Operations added an ominous notation to the thick medical file on Captain James T. Kirk. The chief surgeon advised against subjecting the patient to the stress of military business in view of his uncertain condition but the order had been adamant, and eventually permission was granted to release the report to the blind Starfleet officer. That it was bad news was certain; how it would affect their prestigious patient was never fully comprehended.

The attendants detected no immediate reaction to the incident as far as the patient's behavior patterns were concerned. Hours later during daily, routine examination, they'd approached the task almost fearfully, prepared for an emotional overload that would aggravate the hysteria to the breaking point with ensuing insanity. But there had been nothing, no change of any kind, and they had doubtfully concluded that his untenable condition was definitely related to a self-perpetuating psychological condition of defensive proportions, probably irreversible. Later that evening he'd gone into cardiac arrest and the medics spent several frantic moments restoring the circulatory/respiratory functions to full capacity. The bottom line had been reached: the medical facilities and personnel on Starbase 27 were inadequate to treat the untreatable.

Transport to Starbase 12 was uneventful, the small group of patients having been lightly sedated to make the trip easier on them and the accompanying technicians. Upon entry to the hospital, the examinations would begin all over again and the duo-biotronic skeletal, muscular and endocrine/mucosal spectrums of each patient would be studied and programmed into the computer to assist in diagnosis and treatment.

Kirk's condition had deteriorated somewhat after his return to semi-consciousness because he'd refused to respond to instructions despite vigorous prodding. He'd been relegated to intravenous feedings until the doctors could discover a combination of chemical/audio therapy that would encourage his basic instinct to survive. As far as they could determine, his vision had not improved at all, and the patient's mental attitude could only be described as "uncooperative and difficult!" And until he regained full consciousness, there would be no psychiatric therapy either. Baffled, the physicians faced the double quandary of being unable to treat the disease or the symptoms.

He was ultimately assigned to a remote corner of the hospital, a small but comfortable single room overlooking the carefully landscaped atrium where improving patients were allowed to relax in the open air and, on occasion, receive visitors. It was presumed that if he even partially regained his eyesight, the attractive surroundings would stimulate further recovery. Sounds of human conversation and the smell of fresh air and growing vegetation might possibly evoke a positive reaction as a first step in reaching this recalcitrant man who was so deeply buried within himself.

Accordingly, his windows were opened every morning and he was watched closely by both electronic and human scanners for signs of return.

On the sixth day of the sixth month since the attack on the Enterprise Kirk's mind stirred to life. Or rather, a kind of half-life. He'd been uncomfortably aware of things done to his body, needles probing, fingers and hands rubbing and turning him, voices shouting to him as though from a great distance even though he sensed the owners were very near. He had floated above it all, willing to leave the scene entirely except for a nagging memory that kept him hovering just below understanding. There seemed to be something he couldn't quite remember, something that had caused great

pain, a noise that had filled his being with fiery agony and left him squeezed barely between the limits of life and death.

The dream persisted and he had accepted the state of half sleep as natural, something not to be questioned. He only knew that he was and would continue to be until something outside his perception changed the rules. There was no indecision, it was simply a state of suspension that he neither challenged nor accepted. And he would have been content to exist that way forever until death intervened.

Then sensation had come suddenly: he had to know -- something. A memory had yanked him back from his wraith-like slumber, and he'd had to respond. He felt a great longing. Someone -- he didn't know who or why -- had called out to him; but he couldn't find the other...?

Just as quickly as it had come, the feeling died, leaving him heaving with anxiety, groping for the warmth of a familiar hand and listening for the sound of a comrade's voice. His mind swirled through the darkness, searching, remembering, quivering with fear and shame as fragments of a burning ship focused against the blackness of oblivion. He could smell the burning metal, hear the screams of wounded crewmen, feel the vibration of a great ship straining to maintain stability. And the thundering blasts of attack had continued until everything had gone dark and sound had become silence.

The flashback had left him shaken and sweaty, the returning blackness a comforting relief as he writhed in his bed in terror. But the enormity of the memory washed over him again like a clinging wave of suffocating slime. He tried to scream out against the torment but no sound came from his throat and he became aware that no one knew that he was struggling with a replay of disaster. He had no way of determining if it was day or night, whether there was anyone nearby to hear him or if anyone even cared.

Furthermore, he didn't know where he was or how he'd gotten there! He was surrounded by hospital smells and sounds, but he could not recall how he'd arrived or how long he'd been there.

And he couldn't go back. His comfortable cocoon was gone and he had to deal with reality, a cold, unfeeling reality that was frighteningly ugly, a reality that had claimed him with a cruel certainty, reducing him to a mere remnant of a man, uncaring and unseeing. He had lost his ship and his crew, and hadn't even been able to fire one returning shot at the concealed assassins. Now he was supposed to scrape together what was left of his honor and pretend to be brave. But he didn't want to be brave, he wanted to die.

The doctors discovered his return to full consciousness the next morning and Kirk grudgingly acknowledged their presence with involuntary reactions to their probing. After undergoing a grilling which he ranked comparable to the proverbial third degree, they'd left him to his silent darkness again, taking their guarded optimisms with them to the next patient. For a while he explored his bed carefully with his fingers, noting the call button on his pillow to summon the nurse, finding controls to raise and lower his feet and head, and locating the bedside console where water, tissues, and an unidentifiable container reassured him that he was indeed in a hospital.

And there were tubes...in his arms...in his nose...

It had occurred to him that he might not be in a Federation hospital except that the doctors seemed definitely human and one of them had a hauntingly familiar Georgia accent. At least he wasn't a prisoner somewhere else in the galaxy.

He understood that the questioning had been meant to be helpful; but he hadn't wanted anyone's help. Perhaps if he ignored them they would stop bothering him and let him die in peace. He decided to resist any

future attempts to aid his recovery.

They'd removed the tubes when he'd recovered fully, but after a few days of refusing to eat, the tubes had been reinserted into his arms, taped securely in case he tried to remove them himself. The nurses began visiting him more often, too, talking loudly in bright cheerful voices as though he were a recalcitrant child. One of them reminded him of Chapel. However, the next time she waited on him he realized there was really very little comparison to the head nurse of the Enterprise, just a slight tone of voice that had brought back an image of dark blue eyes and sculptured blonde hair. Kirk chided himself silently at the impossible hope of Christine being there, recalling that she had gone Earthside to complete her medical training and was now a full-fledged MD. Just for a moment he considered the feasibility of insanity, then ruled that out as inconceivable.

Everything was perfectly clear, there was no denying that he was in a hospital for a reason. There was nothing missing, all fingers and toes were accounted for and in working order. His ears were functioning, too; he could hear the slightest noise, and identified different nurses and attendants from the peculiar rustle of individual uniforms. There seemed to be nothing wrong except that he couldn't see.

Someone examined his eyes daily and once he'd been wheeled to another part of the hospital where he'd felt the cold metal of electronic probes against his forehead and neck. But no crack of light had penetrated his solitary isolation, no hint of lifting haze encouraged hope. And he'd sunk back into a despairing, uncooperative mood that had discouraged even the most genial of nurses and staff.

Starship cadets must exhibit certain qualities enabling them to face death, mutiny, treachery, the loss of friends and loved ones -- as well as forfeiting a life of comfort and security. Starship captain candidates must be intelligent, healthy, demonstrate leadership tendencies, and have an inexhaustible need to excel in every confrontation.

Jim Kirk had fulfilled those requirements with flying colors, and had risen quickly to prominence in both the classroom and the field. He had been cited for bravery, honored for meritorious achievements, and decorated for performing above and beyond the call of duty during ten years of space duty.

The innate stubbornness of that certain type of man who is born to lead, who would not give up his ship until there was nothing left to give up, who would willingly sacrifice himself before allowing subordinates to be exposed to certain peril -- that noble heritage would continue to the last spark of life in the starship captain. And James T. Kirk was no exception. The embers of moral obligation, allegiance to duty and responsibility to the Federation still remained firmly within Kirk's soul, even as he struggled to embrace the tranquility of death.

He had finally allowed them to put him in a wheelchair for an hour each day, and one nurse with the most softly enticing voice he had ever heard had managed to get some food down him. He'd succumbed in a weak moment when her gentle coaxing had reminded him of another voice, another time, another place. And for a while it had seemed almost like a game. She would enter his room every day at the same time to conduct the routine objectively, that is, to get as much nourishing, solid food down his throat as she could manage.

But one day she was transferred to another part of the hospital where her gentle expertise would be directed towards mentally impaired children,

and he grew silently uncompromising once more.

In desperation they'd promised to remove the tubes if he would eat at least part of his meals, and he opted for the lesser of two evils since the discomfort of being attached to the tubes had proved to be irritating and he wanted to be rid of them. But his meal trays went largely untouched anyway, with only enough of the food disturbed to give the appearance of consumption and to maintain the bargain. As a result, he grew weaker, it soon became necessary for a male nurse to assist him into the bathroom and help him in and out of his wheelchair.

Surprisingly, he did ask for more time in his chair and seemed to look forward to being wheeled over to the open window where the sun would warm his face and the moving air loosen the hastily combed, lengthening hair causing it to fall casually over his forehead. One of the younger nurses, recently arrived from Earth, noticed Kirk's increasingly unkempt appearance and suggested the need for a barber. His easy compliance startled her at first, and she rushed to her superior to report his consent. Since keeping up one's image would indicate an interest in one's own condition, the doctors saw this as a positive step towards recovery. His hair was washed and cut carefully, and his ragged nails trimmed to a comfortable length. He seemed to be shyly grateful to the technicians performing the extra tasks and they warmly congratulated him on his improvement.

Nevertheless, the night nurse's recorded entry reflected the tenacity of a man bent on his own destruction. Her cheerful comments as to his improved appearance only invoked a casual shrug and a weary retort.

"Better to have it done now than by the mortician."

The long road to recovery was definitely going to be rocky, the doctors agreed gloomily. Their record for discharging difficult cases would be marred by this one. There could no longer be any doubt that it had come down to a life and death struggle between physicians and patient. But the contest persisted. Kirk was monitored more closely than ever, and another specialist, a highly recommended psychiatrist, was finally assigned exclusively to the case.

Dr. Trezand, an expert in terminal psychosis and other disturbances of the mentally ill, studied his new patient for several weeks, reviewing past history and questioning anyone who had come in contact with the former starship captain. His attempts to communicate with Kirk had been met with bland disinterest, and the typical alternative had been to issue orders for a variety of experimental stimulants, one of which elevated the patient to a state of hysterical sobbing and another that induced minor convulsions.

A month later the Chief of Staff ordered the drug therapy stopped, and Trezand changed tactics, loosening a barrage of taunts and challenges on his obstinate subject that could be heard all the way down the halls to the nursing stations. That method ceased too -- after other physicians and patients had complained to the administrator.

Having failed in using controversial, theoretical tactics, the determined psychiatrist consulted some old texts dating back to the twentieth century. Among one of the suggested treatments for depressive psychosis was a form of electric shock therapy. Bizarre as it seemed to him, a distinctive doctor of modern psychiatry, Trezand was ready to consider anything after months of stalemate.

He informed the silent Kirk of his intentions, warning the officer that it would be very uncomfortable. The option, of course, was to simply follow orders and submit to the due course of his recovery. But Kirk was unmoved



by the words, refusing even to turn away from the open window to acknowledge the other's presence, and Trezand shrugged on his way out at the familiar lack of response. It would take at least a week to set up the shock procedure. Perhaps after Kirk had thought it over he would change his tune. But Trezand didn't have much confidence with this patient, and he confessed to himself that he would soon have to admit defeat.

The shuttle circled the landing platform slowly and McCoy watched the procedure with guarded interest, the old nervous apprehension of using the transporter again forming beads of perspiration on his upper lip. It had taken two weeks to travel to Starbase 12 where Kirk had been transferred after diagnosis at Starbase 27. The former chief surgeon hadn't seen Kirk for almost eight months -- since shortly before the attack on the Enterprise, and McCoy suddenly realized that his nervousness was not entirely due to having to use the transporter.

He waited his turn, trying to concentrate on other matters, and finally took his place on one of the eight circles near the seven other travelers.

Dematerialization was just as bad as he'd remembered, and he paused for the disorientation to subside before looking for a surface car to take him to the treatment center. The trip consisted of a few breathless moments over several kilometers, ending in front of a large, imposing structure of glass and stone.

Mondez Transgalactic Rehabilitation Center proclaimed a large plaque on the impressively massive front doors. However, gaining cooperation with admitting personnel was another matter, and McCoy scowled characteristically as he followed directions to the fourth office he'd visited in an hour....

"May I help you, sir?" The pretty thing sitting behind the console smiled up at him innocently, then faltered uncertainly beneath two glaring blue eyes staring a hole through her upper thoracic region.

"I am here to see Captain James T. Kirk of the USS Enterprise. I am the chief medical officer, formerly his attending physician, and I wish to talk to someone as to the condition and treatment of my patient!"

The receptionist blanched as the words bounced off her belligerently, and hastily she punched a few buttons on the console behind her. Pausing almost impatiently to read the printout, she turned and pointed to a doorway down the hall. Over the door read the words: Dr. P.R. Metcalf, Chief Administrator of Psychiatry.

"Thank you, my dear -- they finally figured why I'm here!" He bowed gallantly and stalked triumphantly towards the door. The startled young woman smiled timidly and watched his retreat with wonder.

Dr. Metcalf turned out to be elderly, bald, and stooped. He turned impatiently towards the intruder and inquired balefully, "Well, what is it? State your business quickly!"

McCoy was taken aback by the doctor's appearance, expecting a younger, more professional looking figure to fit the title of Chief Administrator.

"I...ah...I'm Dr. Leonard McCoy -- from the USS Enterprise on sick leave from Starbase 12. I've come to see Captain Kirk. He's a patient here -- he was my patient -- responsibility, aboard the Enterprise and I am concerned about his disability." He lapsed into silence as the other circled his desk, pawing ineffectually at the paperwork littering the top of it, muttering to himself peevishly.

"McCoy...McCoy...to see Captain Kirk -- oh yes, Doctor, here it is. Orders forwarded from Gordon Paulson of Starbase 12.... Leonard McCoy,

MD, authorized to visit patient James T. Kirk, without restrictions, during any length of time necessary...etc., etc., etc." Metcalf scratched his fuzzy dome absently as he finished reading the instructions in silence, then looked up pleasantly at his startled visitor.

"Of course, Dr. McCoy -- Leonard, isn't it? Very happy to see you!" He extended a shriveled paw eagerly and gave McCoy a surprisingly firm handshake.

"Yes...Dr. Metcalf? I'd like to see James Kirk right away if I may? And I'd like to observe his treatment -- unofficially, of course -- while I'm here. Are there facilities nearby?" McCoy frowned slightly, wondering if the other man had heard him since he seemed to be leafing absent-mindedly through the pages of an incredibly tattered reference manual.

"Yes, yes, of course; there are fine facilities just around the corner! We have all kinds of rooms for visiting specialists -- just take your pick! Of course, some of them may already be occupied...." He drifted off into a barely perceptible drone and McCoy backed away towards the door prudently, wondering whether he needed any further documents to substantiate his identity; then decided better of it, turned and fled into the corridor.

He leaned against the wall for a moment to collect his wits, and saw the sweet young thing advancing towards him from the reception area. She was waving a sheaf of papers so he decided to wait and see if they had anything to do with him. They did, and shortly thereafter he was inspecting living quarters for visiting physicians. He selected one that overlooked a courtyard formed by four connecting wings of the hospital, and experienced his first real pangs of misgiving.

"Dr. Metcalf is really a dear, isn't he," gushed the receptionist softly and McCoy blinked in astonishment. "All the patients love him -- we're just one big happy family!" And giggling innocuously, she backed out of the room, McCoy's signature dutifully scribbled on the residency form she had shoved under his nose insistently. He had the option to stay a day or a month, with extensions permitted according to visiting requirements and the Administrator's approval. And McCoy decided he'd have no problem in that department.

The next step was to locate Kirk. But he recognized the need for some briefing on Kirk's treatment, and after stashing his meager supply of clothing and toilet supplies in the room, set off in the direction of Medical Records with his credentials firmly in hand. The layout of the rehabilitation center was easily ascertained with guidance charts at the entrance to each wing, and after inspecting the first one, McCoy found the double doors leading to the compact records complex. It looked more like a small library to him than a Medical Records center, files stretching in all directions flanked by viewcreens at each end, and he hesitated uncertainly.

A small figure dressed in sterile blue sat behind a huge computer console along the far wall, and McCoy signalled authoritatively. She smiled courteously, if not warmly, and McCoy soon had the exchange number he needed to punch out the file on Kirk, James T., Captain, Starfleet UFP.

There was surprisingly little to study, most of the entries ending in the same dead end: "no change...try m\_\_\_\_\_, 200 cc intravenously; no change...try t\_\_\_\_\_, 100 cc intramuscularly; no change...try b\_\_\_\_\_, by mouth, 100 mg., prn..."

The last recorded notation had been entered several days before, and McCoy glanced at the room number to affirm Kirk's whereabouts. He jotted down the necessary data needed for the next morning's excursion, noting the name "Trezand" with disinterest, then headed back to his room. He needed to digest the latest information on Kirk's condition before facing his

friend. It would not do to go bargain'g into the other's room with charged emotions and impulsive gestures. Morning would be soon enough.

Sleep was almost impossible, troubled dreams lengthening the night with wakeful pauses; McCoy finally gave up to watch a purplish sun rise over the horizon, its anemic rays casting a pale, watery haze over the thready clouds beyond the city. He pulled himself out of bed to stagger to the bathroom, then stared blearily at the mirror in an attempt to restore his fortitude. Finally he resorted to a cold shower, overruling the shivering protests of his reluctant body.

Breakfast was early. Two or three other inhabitants glanced at him curiously as he filled his cup with the blackest coffee he'd ever seen, and on a last impulse, grabbed two hard rolls from a dispenser nearby. The rolls were dry and stuck to the roof of his mouth; but the coffee was surprisingly good, warming the icy nervousness that gripped his stomach fitfully and sent the required stimulus to his brain to finish the waking process. As other early birds drifted into the eating area, he rose to place his utensils in the sterilizer, and left the coolness of the dining room for the bright warmth of the courtyard.

The chairs were empty, of course, most of the patients having not received their morning meals or medication, and McCoy wandered around the environs of the enclosure in deep thought. He'd come this far to find Kirk, but hadn't given enough consideration as to what he would do when he found him. Jim was being treated by professionals at this level -- what could he offer instead? Worry tugged at his composure as he paced the perimeter of the grassy space, and he began to wonder if he had made a mistake in coming.

The room was dimly lighted with one small beam over the bed, the shades tightly closed over the windowed wall. McCoy stood motionlessly, peering into the gloom until he spotted the wheelchair in the corner, its occupant facing the wall as though in rejection of the comfort around him. Audio tapes lay in scattered disarray near the small communications console beside the bed, and exotic scents of ripe fruits and bright flowers mingled with the sterility of medical disinfectant odors. McCoy jumped slightly as the figure in the chair called out flatly.

"Nurse, I don't want any breakfast this morning; have them take it away."

Unnerved, McCoy played for time, marching softly over to the table that held a tray with covered containers neatly arranged within reaching distance of the patient.

"Yes, sir; I'll remove it immediately. Is there anything else I can get for you?"

The wheelchair turned noiselessly towards him, its slender patient tilting his head to listen carefully. "Say again? I didn't hear you."

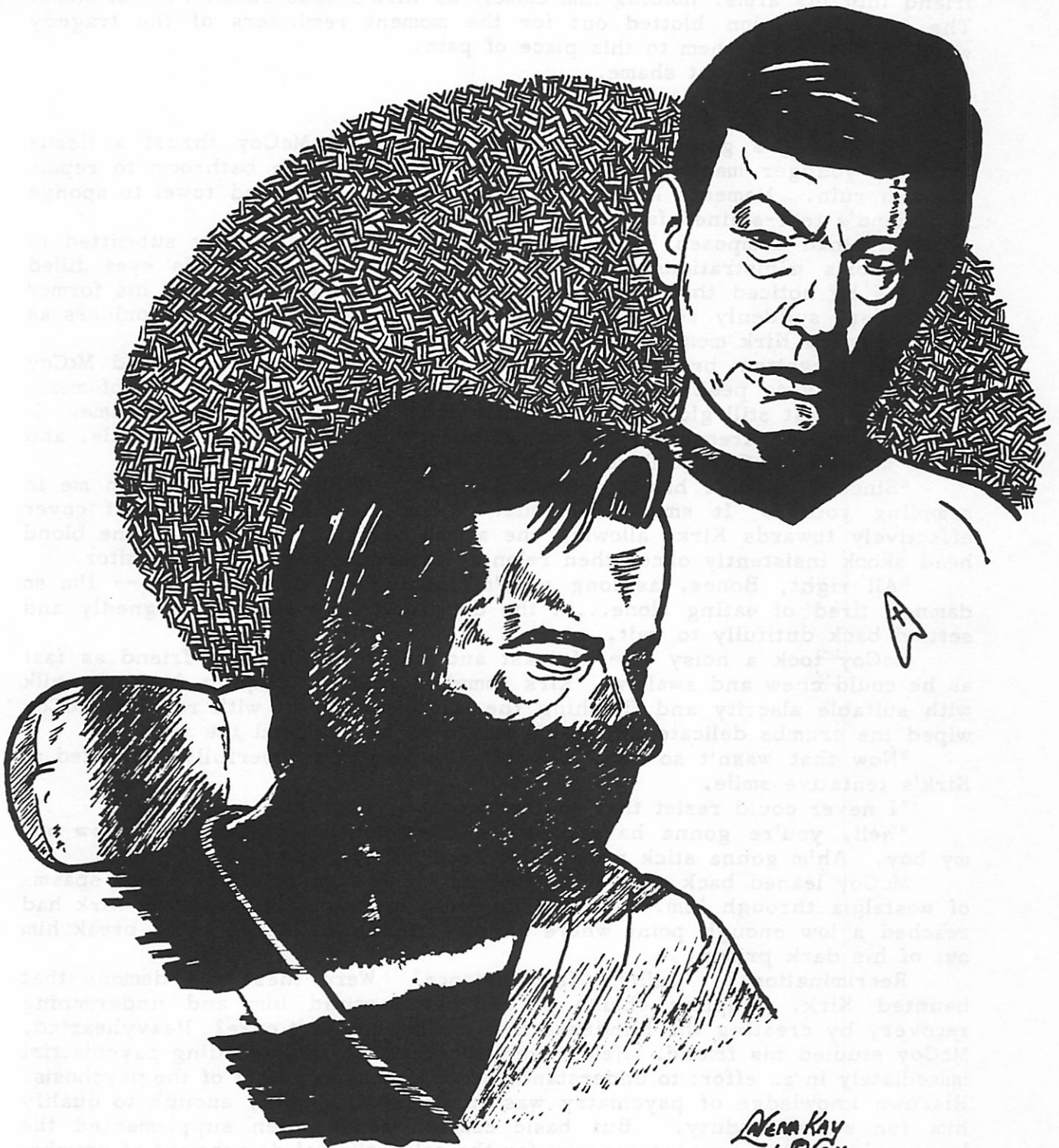
Raising his voice obediently, McCoy instinctively took a step closer to the other.

"I said, I'll remove it immediately, and is there anything else...?"

"Bones?" dared the whisper, an element of hope echoing faintly in the query. "Is that you...McCoy?"

"Yes, Jim. I heard you were here and I had to come see if I...." He floundered mutely as Kirk reached out for him, grasping the doctor's trembling hand with a ferocity that belied the frailty of its source.

"Bones! Bones! I've worried about you -- the crew -- have you seen any of them? Bones, it's so good to hear your voice --" His own broke



then, piteously, and McCoy, without hesitating, knelt down and gathered his friend into his arms, holding him closely as Kirk's sobs shook both of them. The joy of reunion blotted out for the moment reminders of the tragedy which had brought them to this place of pain.

They wept without shame.

Finally, "It's going to be okay now, Jim....," McCoy thrust a tissue into the younger man's hands and disappeared into the bathroom to repair his own ruin. Moments later he returned with a dampened towel to sponge his friend's tear-stained face.

Kirk had composed himself for the most part and meekly submitted to the doctor's ministrations with a quiet "thank you". McCoy's eyes filled again as he noticed the prominent cheekbones and sharp chin of his former commander, suddenly reliving the impression of gaunt ribs and shoulders as he'd embraced Kirk moments before.

The forgotten breakfast tray sat just a few steps away, and McCoy moved quickly to peek under the cover, finding generous portions of meat, eggs, and toast still glowing with warmth from the portable energy dome. It was painfully apparent that his former charge had been skipping meals, and on an impulse, McCoy gambled recklessly.

"Since I haven't had my breakfast yet," he lied, "will you join me in sampling yours? It smells delicious!" And he waved the largest cover effectively towards Kirk, allowing the aroma to drift enticingly. The blond head shook insistently once, then relented in acquiescence to his visitor.

"All right, Bones, as long as I'm sharing it with someone -- I'm so damned tired of eating alone...in the dark...." He sighed resignedly and settled back dutifully to wait.

McCoy took a noisy bite of toast and began feeding his friend as fast as he could chew and swallow. Kirk complied readily, gulping down the milk with suitable alacrity and finishing the last bite of meat with relish. McCoy wiped the crumbs delicately from his mouth as he replaced the tray.

"Now that wasn't so bad, was it?" he asserted cheerfully, gratified at Kirk's tentative smile.

"I never could resist that southern charm, Doctor!"

"Well, you're gonna have plenty of that south'n chahm from naow on, my boy. Ah'm gonna stick aroun' and keep ma eye on y'all!"

McCoy leaned back against the bed as Kirk's familiar chuckle sent spasms of nostalgia through him. Perhaps he could turn the tide. Maybe Kirk had reached a low enough point where an old friend's influence could break him out of his dark prison.

Recriminations? Guilt? Incompetence? Were these the demons that haunted Kirk, coupling chains of self-hate around him and undermining recovery by creating the blindness that medics couldn't cure? Heavyhearted, McCoy studied his friend. He'd have to confer with the attending psychiatrist immediately in an effort to understand the rollercoaster effect of the psychosis. His own knowledge of psychiatry was fundamental -- only enough to qualify him for starship duty. But basic common sense often supplemented the lack, substituting genuine concern for the cold, clinical detachment of psychotherapy.

He was, as he had confessed once to Spock, "just an old country doctor." But he knew Jim Kirk and was familiar with the former starship captain's idiosyncracies. Who better to deal with the disturbed environs of his friend's mind? Besides, this was not just another statistic they were dealing with, this was his captain, his confidant and his friend of many



years. No, McCoy concluded to himself, nothing would stand in his way, not even Starfleet Command, from assisting in Kirk's treatment and recovery. Because, there would be recovery.... or he would hang up his stethoscope once and for all.

He walked over to the blinds, opening them quietly to let in the strange bluish sunshine, contemplating his next challenge.

"Looks like a beautiful day out there, Jim. Would you care to go for a walk with me? I hear the blue sunshine they have here is extraordinarily beneficial for tired starship captains. It may not look like Tahiti around here, but it sure feels like it!"

"I should get dressed, I suppose, Bones? Yes, a turn in the sun with an old friend would be nice."

The conference with Trezand was unpleasant but productive -- in spite of disparity, stalemate and subsequent intervention by the chief of psychiatry. When Gordon's name had been mentioned during their heated altercation, however, McCoy realized that supportive words had preceded his arrival at Starbase 12, and his position was a mystery no longer.

Whatever Gordon had divulged in his communique must have been influential enough to swing the pendulum in his favor, prompting Metcalf to issue unlimited visitation and consultation privileges. McCoy's interest in the ongoing therapy had been regarded with obvious condescension; but ultimately, in a gesture of professional brotherhood, Trezand reluctantly agreed to consider any reasonable opinions -- cautioning the others that responsibility for the patient's response would be shared equally. The former chief medical officer of the Enterprise agreed optimistically despite the stern admonition. He and Jim would sink or swim together, he'd vowed silently; both of their futures would hinge on steadfast confidence in his friend's mental stability.

The doctor realized that he'd only touched the tip of the iceberg, and that whatever transpired in the next few weeks or months might be shattering to both of them. McCoy was considering retirement as far as Starfleet was concerned -- perhaps he'd never accept another deep space assignment even if Kirk did recover. Was it unwise to rake the captain over the coals of some inner conflict, chancing some flaw in his mental chemistry that might erupt to destroy them both? McCoy could only speculate. But the die was cast; he was already devotedly committed to saving his friend from a life of waste, and himself from a life of personal reproach.

## CHAPTER 4

# GOING HOME

"Commander Kodor reporting aboard; I wish to be signed in and taken to the bridge immediately. My personal belongings are transporting through the cargo section." His tone was brusque, his eyes appraising the stark appointments of the ship's main transporter chamber. The older technician saluted smartly, expression dutifully subservient to the new master; signalling the Vulcan to follow, the Klingon transporter chief marched briskly from the room towards the lift.

Following graduation from the Klingon Space Academy and several months of deep space training, Kodor had been given permanent assignment to command the Emptor, escort cruiser to the flagship Aerrex -- a trophy which Kalauq had claimed as his due as the new Supreme Warrior. Kodor had accepted the post gravely, reconciled to the inevitability of becoming his brother's right hand, and he chose to ignore the whispers that followed him as he inspected the ship quickly and thoroughly.

Kalauq's ascension to Supreme Warrior had caused a general reorganization of the fleet, and word had it that many of his former subordinates had been visibly shaken by the sinister implications of his unlimited new authority. Rumblings of discontent among the warrior class was an unheard of phenomenon in Klingon history. However, persistent accounts of deserting contingents of officers and underlings could not be curtailed; as speculation surfaced within the elderly aristocracy, Kalauq's first legal decree had been to impose martial law.

Additionally, in a blatant display of patronage, the Supreme Warrior had promised the Emptor to Kodor as he neared the end of his Academy training, a well-earned reward for high achievements. With the Aerrex in temporary drydock for modifications, the Emptor had been readied for a training mission to Defense Depots I and II, along with the transport of replacement personnel to those far flung stations. Kalauq had put it another way: "The opportunity to become acquainted with the ship and crew would prepare him further for active engagement with the enemy." And his Vulcan ward had quietly acknowledged the Klingon's wisdom.

Kodor had reacted with barely concealed relish upon receiving his commission. The Emptor was one of the newer ships of the fleet and had

recently been updated with newly developed electrograv sensor equipment. Her powerful engines had also been adapted to generate instantaneous response for greater maneuverability, a priority in the defense of the flagship.

"Only the best candidates are to be commissioned to my escort ship," Kalauq had declared at a private ceremony honoring the top cadets. "And Kodor, my kinsman, has attained the training necessary to command the Emptor!" Proudly, he approached the Vulcan to present the impressive insignia worn by Klingon commanders; Kodor bore his distinction without flinching, acutely aware of numerous stares of disbelief from the families of the other cadets. But his classmates had quickly responded by saluting Kodor smartly and marching up to shake his hand in the traditional show of solidarity.

He'd been faintly embarrassed by the blatant admiration of younger classmates during his short residency at the Academy. Kodor had rapidly progressed through the lower levels to be greeted somewhat guardedly by upper classmen who had worked diligently to reach their stations in twice the time. But his superior ability had become apparent to all eventually, and reserved friendship had developed between Kodor and several other cadets during the advanced rigors of combat training.

That he was the first alien in Klingon history to have risen to a top military position in such a short time was not lost on Kodor, and he would learn to use the advantage whenever it seemed profitable -- a lesson Kalauq had instilled in him during his months of rehabilitation.

Upon considering the selection of first and second command officers for the Emptor, Kodor remembered two of his former classmates who had shared teamwork and triumph with him faithfully. Now he not only had the opportunity to petition them as shipmates, but the power to do so. Accordingly, the two zealous young Klingons were first on his list of priorities for appointing the ship's staff personnel.

Kahlor and Kootaan reported to the ship the next day, regarding their new commander with the awesome respect he was beginning to enjoy. But the directive to join him later in his captain's quarters was not out of smugness at his new status, rather, there was an air of homecoming in his manner when the three exchanged greetings.. The youngest Klingon, Kootaan, could not hide his enthusiasm -- he had been the most outspoken in class, Kodor recalled with amusement. The easy familiarity of reunited classmates persisted throughout the first staff meeting and Kodor did nothing to discourage the cordiality. Indeed, it was as though a distant echo from his past had usurped his newfound authority.

Overseeing Kahlor and Kootaan aboard the Emptor during the break-in period reminded him keenly of his months at the Academy. The strange exception of a Vulcan in the midst of Klingon society had been quietly accepted, albeit uneasily at times. There was no mistaking the fact that Kodor-the-Vulcan was an oddity, greeted daily with a mixture of curiosity and reserve. Officially recognized as the adopted brother of Kalauq, occasionally Kodor wondered to himself about the authenticity of his relationship with the venturesome Klingon hero.

His abrupt introduction into Klingon society had been unnerving at times, and he had stoically endured the insecurity he'd felt at the lower levels of the Academy. But his swift and astonishingly precipitate grasp of the military and cultural socioeconomic courses permitted him to skip to the final examination in less than the regulation trimester, earned the unspoken respect of both instructors and classmates. Even his indeterminate age had

gone unquestioned because of his obvious physical superiority.

As a result, it had been difficult for his Klingon tutors to ascertain the extent of pre-existing knowledge since the amnesia had rendered him quite helpless in some areas and exceptionally mature in others. By the time he'd reached the battle training classes, he'd surpassed all the other students, and had shown a knowledge of scientific and mathematical concepts far beyond the expertise of the professors.

Kalauq had visited the Academy frequently, following his charge's progress just as diligently as he had at the hospital. And the obvious pride that he exhibited in his brother's progress overshadowed that brilliant student's uncharacteristic, submissive attitude whenever Kalauq visited the classroom. Initially the Vulcan had attributed his emotional discomfort to intimidation by his kinsman's prominence -- his vague uneasiness shielded from everyone as soon as he became aware of the icy tremors creeping up his spine. But his attempts to discount the disquiet that he could neither understand nor defend was fruitless.

Although his matchless comprehension of properly resolved tactical situations was self-evident, Kodor realized that Kalauq's influence was largely responsible for his unprecedented advancement within military environs. And he recognized the fact with an unassuming gravity that only emphasized the aura of strength and maturity that surrounded him wherever he went.

However, Kodor could not help puzzling over Kalauq's refusal to explain his ward's strange heritage, having brushed aside Kodor's confusion over his past as the consequence of his unfortunate accident. But Kodor's nagging doubt persisted that the condition was presumably more serious and had developed from a more mysterious origin. He also found his inability to think back into his past keenly disturbing in more than one respect.

While Kalauq was obviously his legalized kinsman -- records had been produced to prove the connection -- Kodor secretly acknowledged his inherent differences as well as the feeling that it was natural for him to fear and distrust Klingons. Furthermore, one other uncomfortable aspect of his situation remained constant: that of a vague horror hovering just beyond his understanding. It was a horror that increased in intensity whenever he tried to recall anything prior to awakening in the research hospital. He could only surmise that the reaction culminated from some unremembered event that had happened previously, but the mind refused to cooperate in formulating anything consequential.

He was reminded that Kalauq and the doctors had been benignly patient with him, shrugging off his frequent black-outs and ushering him hastily back to his bed when he would awaken unexpectedly in the midst of a cluttered laboratory, his sleeping gown damp with sweat and puzzling flecks of blood. And no detailed accounting was ever made concerning his swollen hands and feet, or the mysterious bruises on his legs. The following day he would be kept heavily sedated, after which he was allowed limited freedom in the exercise area.

When he had persisted as to how soon his memory would return, Kalauq had chided him gently, admonishing that he was lucky to be alive and that he would recover more quickly if he would stop worrying and obey the doctors.

On the day of his ward's release from the hospital Kalauq announced that he had enrolled Kodor in the Klingon Military Academy in the hope that mental and physical stimulation would assist in his readjustment. They had spent the day in a whirlwind tour of the city, concluding with dinner at the Academy Officer's Club. Kalauq remained at his kinsman's side consistently, pointing out landmarks throughout the city and later, introducing him to

officials and instructors.

"Of course, you must follow in my footsteps, little brother," Kalauq had purred excitedly, nodding appreciatively at Kodor's cadet uniform which had been hastily purchased for the evening's ceremonies. The deep blue of the uniform had sparked some quiet note of recognition in Kodor's shuttered mind, but Kalauq had spotted the pensive reaction and had hurriedly provided the distraction of a brisk walk around the Academy grounds.

The buildings were impressive, Kodor admitted to himself later; and if the furnishings in the cramped, shared cadet's quarters were less than private, he'd mentally swallowed his disappointment and obligingly escorted his mentor into the plush officer's complex and the well-equipped command center.

Later he'd assumed a quiet dignity as Kalauq squired him through the banquet hall around groups of swarthy officers discussing tactics, their black and silver dress uniforms resplendent in the flickering blaze of wall torches. Although there were less than fifty initiates present, their patrons and relatives stretched the group to nearly three times that many, and the banquet table labored enticingly under sweet breads, roast griffle meat, pickled fowl, pungent nut and vegetable concoctions as well as wines of all varieties and colors. Kodor was acutely aware of the curious scrutiny directed his way as the fragmented groups seated themselves around the long curved tables, and stiffening imperceptibly, he suddenly realized that preliminary screening had already begun.

Traditionally, the prospective cadets were invited to speak during the banquet on subjects ranging from the likelihood of the galaxy exploding unexpectedly to the classic defense tactics employed in a three to one situation. It was tacitly understood that expert discourse of military topics weighed heavily on final accreditation and Kodor could perceive the fear of doom spreading across the tables to link pale-faced young candidates in mutual apprehension. However, for the most part, subsequent cross-examination was mercifully brief.

Kodor was last to speak and he had risen respectfully to expound on the glories of past Klingon conquests -- having been thoroughly coached by Kalauq earlier in the day. He bowed dutifully in response to the polite applause following his interrogation and would have sat down. But Kalauq interrupted the applause abruptly, springing to his feet to fling an arm around the disconcerted Vulcan.

"He is my beloved brother!" The dark eyes glared defiantly around the room, his wine-thickened voice rising above the startled murmurs around the room.

"And as my brother he will exceed in everything he does!"

Kodor involuntarily shrank from his sponsor's fierce embrace and rigidly suppressed a shiver of distaste as Kalauq's voice dropped to a sinister whisper in the ensuing silence.

"My brother and I have great plans, Gentlemen. He will become a famous warrior, a credit to his adopted empire and destined to forge a chapter of Klingon history that will be remembered for generations to come! Furthermore, I predict that one day you will refer to Kodor and Kalauq as two of the most venerated leaders of Klingon destiny!"

No one stirred as he raked the audience with burning eyes, daring a rebuttal to his challenge. And raising his half-filled glass boldly, Kalauq enjoined the rest to unite in his fervent toast.

"To my brother, Kodor: long may he live! Long may he serve our empire in future conquests of the galaxy!"

The evening progressed to animated conversation, additional toasts to



Arena Kay  
Kidd © 1984



the Klingon Empire and the smashing of wine glasses until the dinner party spilled its tipsy guests into the street. Kodor immediately took command of Kalauq's fast surface car which had been parked near the door, and the older Klingon made no noticeable objection -- having reached the sodden condition of agreeable indifference.

It was a short, quiet trip to Kalauq's estate, P'Yhlarra, which Kodor had glimpsed only briefly earlier in the day. Between unfamiliar ground car controls and a barely recognizable route, Kodor's concentration was entirely occupied with navigation until they'd passed through the outer remote controlled gates. Extricating Kalauq from the vehicle and getting him into the mansion was difficult but eventually managed, and Kodor wearily deposited the inebriated Klingon onto an elaborate four-poster in the large master bedroom some minutes later.

After pulling off the warrior's boots and awkwardly removing his heavily decorated tunic, Kodor covered the dozing figure and retreated silently towards the door, intending to secure another bedroom for himself. It was much too late to find a servant and inquire as to where he was expected to spend the night.

But Kalauq roused suddenly, lifting himself up on one elbow to thickly query the tiptoeing Vulcan.

"Where...where are you going...Kodor?"

Since Kodor was not positive of that fact himself, he answered as simply as he could.

"I'm going to get some sleep, Kalauq. I'll see you in the morning."

Kalauq shook his head crookedly, gesturing impatiently as he tried to focus his eyes on the moving form.

"Don't go -- stay with me! I sometimes have... nightmares...."

Kodor paused in the doorway, wondering if the request were made in earnest or merely the mutterings of a half-conscious drunkard. But the Klingon's plea tugged strangely at his conscience, and he looked back towards the bed as the other sighed.

"You will soon be gone for many months, and we have much to talk about, little brother. Family matters...and such. Stay with me? There is so little time...and we have much to accomplish...."

Kalauq fell back on the pillow, his lips moving in unspoken ramblings, and surprisingly, Kodor felt unconstrained. The Klingon was beyond intimidation, his stupor having rendered him helpless; and as Kodor glanced at him briefly before stretching out on the fur rug nearby, he reminded himself that Kalauq was his only key to the past. Perhaps he could convince him to reveal something tangible -- something he could remember -- in the morning. Kalauq was his kinsman. Therefore, Kalauq must have knowledge of his past, immediate or otherwise. And Kodor vowed that he would not be satisfied until his brother gave it back to him.

Typically, Kalauq's answers were frustratingly incomplete. But Kodor persisted in his quiet way until Kalauq shrugged carelessly, his eyes glinting in amused exasperation.

"You are persistent, aren't you, Kodor? That is one trait we must take full advantage of one day. Very well, you would find out eventually; I may as well tell you all that I know myself. It will be painful," he warned, shaking his finger as if to a small boy. "But I wish to have no more of your prodding."

"I must know where I come from, my family name and so forth. Surely you must know -- ?" Kodor fell silent as Kalauq nodded somberly, turning

away as if in deep thought. For a moment neither of them spoke; then the Klingon faced Kodor almost defensively, his arms folded across his chest.

"We found you in the remains of an outpost many years ago, a mere youngster ready to take on the whole Klingon landing party. Your family was dead, there was no one left to take care of you." Kalauq cocked his head in speculation, pondering the other's wooden expression. "There had been some sort of plague as nearly as we could determine. The rest had been dead for some time."

The Vulcan stared back at him doubtfully.

"I don't remember any of that. Why don't I remember -- it must have been terrifying to a young child --."

Kalauq waved a hand impatiently.

"You'd been injured -- there was a bump on your head. We managed to catch you after a while, and you were screaming like a wild animal." He smiled indulgently. "We brought you back with us and tried to convince you that we were friendly. But that was a long time ago. Your memory remained deficient and after the hunting accident of recent months, we discovered that the rest of it had been completely wiped out." He shook his head regretfully at Kodor's penetrating stare.

"The doctors don't know if total recall is possible but we will continue with the treatments as long as there is a chance...." He grasped Kodor's shoulders with firm hands and peered inquiringly into the Vulcan's face.

"But that doesn't matter, little brother; we can go on together as long as we have each other. I will take care of you and as soon as your military training is finished we will work together for the glory of the empire! You are my beloved brother, Kodor; never forget that!"

He had released the other then, smiling affectionately and clapping his disbelieving kinsman playfully on the back. Kodor had never broached the matter again.

Eighteen months later Kodor had satisfactorily completed his whirlwind training and had advanced to command status. He had revisited the hospital only once during the indoctrination, re-emerging in a state of confused mental and physical exhaustion. The doctors had returned him to P'Yhlarra heavily sedated where he slept non-stop for several days. Kalauq had been unusually optimistic, smiling benevolently as he encouraged his ward to rest and regain his strength. Despite that reassurance, Kodor had been plagued with new doubts and growing consternation.

But recovery was benign and he'd soon returned to his studies. After months of academic routine he found the vigorous deep space missions exciting and challenging, and he embraced every new danger with confidence. There was no debating the fact the alien belonged on a deep space cruiser, the rigors of such an existence appearing to be of second nature to him as noted by his command instructors. Adaptation to such a life seemed as natural and logical as the constant turning of the planet Khaz.

Posing as a fellow patient, McCoy dropped in on Kirk several times every day to supervise his meals and accompany him around the courtyard for exercise. He described the hospital to Kirk in detail, including the nearby wing of permanently impaired children. Sometimes Kirk listened to him, sometimes he retreated into his own world of darkness. McCoy was never sure what mood his former captain would assume, and a game of questions and answers became habit as the doctor attempted to cope with the

fluctuating attitudes of his newly acquired charge.

Trezand continued his stringent professional therapy, monitoring his "associate's" activities surreptitiously, grudgingly admitting to McCoy four weeks later that a slight variation had been noted in the patient's attitude.

"But only slight," he warned pessimistically. "Tomorrow he may revert to total reticence."

"I don't think so," McCoy disagreed slowly. "He knows now that someone really cares whether he lives or dies. And since his mental condition didn't happen all at once, he probably won't miraculously snap back to normal overnight either. He just...needs!" He sighed heavily.

"We'll see, Dr. McCoy. In the meantime, I shall consider his condition static until I can ascertain definite signs of progress. And if there is no further improvement we shall have to discuss educating him to live with his disability."

"You mean his blindness," McCoy corrected bluntly. "You're going to teach him braille, and how to walk with a white cane -- ."

"Really, doctor! You must catch up on the latest medical journals. That sort of thing went out with the twenty-first century. We use sensor belts and brain implants today. He won't be allowed to deteriorate into an old relic living on a park bench!" Trezand snorted in disgust. "Just how long has it been since you visited a research hospital? Well, you'll have a chance to do some catching up if you stick around here long enough."

"I'm 'sticking around' here for another reason, Trezand," McCoy snapped, his eyes blue coals of indignation. "After my patient recovers maybe I'll take some time off to 'catch up', as you put it!"

"So be it. However, if you really want to help your friend, you'll investigate our humane methods that enable the blind to live comfortably among the sighted, productive lives in most cases. I'm sure the service will pension him out with adequate -- ."

"We'll talk about pensioning him out when it's absolutely necessary, Doctor. Right now," McCoy fumed hotly, his hands gripping the edge of the other's desk with white-knuckled urgency, "I'm only interested in finding out why he can't see and doing something about it!"

The psychiatrist rose unperturbedly and moved towards the door. "This conversation is over, Dr. McCoy. I think it best if you cool off a bit before saying good-night to your patient. I doubt that you could be objective in your present state...." And he turned on his heel to disappear down the corridor, leaving McCoy muttering to himself angrily.

Trezand is right -- I am out of date. But I've never had to deal with this kind of problem before. He shrugged sorrowfully to himself and started down the hall to Jim's wing. Maybe I'm hurting Jim by interfering in his treatment. I'm no psychiatrist, that's for sure -- my emotions always get in the way! But I've got to keep trying. I couldn't live with myself if I quit now; and Jim would soon wonder why I stopped hanging around. He trusts me -- that's why he's responding. I have to continue to encourage that trust or we're both lost. The real problem is that something's troubling Jim Kirk, something so painful that he can't forgive himself -- or anyone else for that matter -- for being alive. I've seen that tendency in him before. Only this time it's far worse!

He paused in front of the door to Kirk's room, wondering if the other would sense his disturbance. Then, taking a deep breath, he pushed open the door and called out genially.

"It's me, Jim, here to tuck you in as usual. How do you feel -- can I get you anything before I turn in?" Even being in the same room with Kirk made him feel more at home, as though they were back on the ship.

"Thanks, Bones; guess that walk we took this evening tired me out. I just want to get some sleep."

McCoy heard a familiar sigh as he turned down the light over the bed. And he couldn't deny a pang of remorse as he noted the other's vacant gaze.

"Okay, Jim, get some sleep. I'll be back in the morning."

Stifling the impulse to blurt out, "Sleep tight, don't let the bedbugs bite," he slipped out again quietly. The old cliché had tempered Kirk's tired dismissals many times in the past, and McCoy wondered how long it would be before he could revert to the old course of teasing banter between friends. A flippant word at the wrong time might plunge Jim back into despair.

It's like walking on broken glass in bare feet, he thought ruefully, although he'd never walked on shattered glass in his entire life.

The short walk to his sleeping quarters was usually a time of self-reflection. He'd go over and over his conversations with Kirk to find a nuance, a bitter response, a slip of the tongue -- anything that might offer an opening to Kirk's blockage.

I have to get him to talk about himself first until he can admit that he has a problem. He knows there's nothing wrong physically; the doctors have repeatedly assured him of that fact. I must find the key, the repressed guilt that will unlock the barrier that he's constructed.

It was always hard to get to sleep. During the day he held himself in such reserve against doing or saying the wrong thing that letting go into relaxation and sleep was a bit harder each night. But he would resort to sleeping drugs only when it became impossible to get enough rest otherwise. He'd been with Kirk nearly a month! In the time he'd been on Starbase 12 he'd found that Kirk's behavior required extraordinary patience -- and he reasoned that he could not expect the old Kirk to surface immediately. It might take months, even years, before the starship captain could resume his former self -- or, at least, a semblance of his former self.

The Enterprise is gone, McCoy berated himself wearily. Jim might possibly never be able to command her again, particularly, the same vessel he'd piloted around the galaxy for years.

His mind dwelling on pleasanter memories of the ship, McCoy drifted into a dream-filled sleep of happier times. Oddly enough, it seemed as if reality were a dream -- a nightmare from which he would awaken to mull over and discard in relief. He recalled having read somewhere that life's realities were really dreams and that we returned to reality when we slept.

Just like the alternate universes in time and space, McCoy mused wistfully, Jim and I are in another time, another place....

Many troubled dreams later McCoy awakened to the same reality -- a slender, sightless Kirk waiting for another morning visit. But one morning McCoy sensed a difference in his friend's attitude, a nervous hesitancy as though he wanted something and didn't know quite how to ask for it. The pensive mood lasted through lunch and the afternoon snooze in the courtyard. McCoy had taken up the book as usual to continue reading aloud about two brothers carving a home out of the wilderness of nineteenth-century Earth. Kirk hadn't expressed an opinion for nine chapters. McCoy began the tenth.

"Bones, can we dispense with the book for a while and just talk?"

McCoy looked up in surprise, pausing in the middle of a forgotten

sentence to consider the request curiously. He'd chosen to ignore Kirk's restlessness, and most of the morning's conversation had been his own cheery observations about breakfast, other patients, and the cute nurse down the hall. All of it had seemed to bounce off the other harmlessly, without reaction; and pensively, McCoy had continued the light banter.

"Sure, Jim. What do you want to talk about?" He marked the page carefully and laid the book on the bench beside him. The bluish sunlight gave human skin tones a greenish cast, and for a moment McCoy wondered if his companion was feeling ill -- until glancing around the courtyard he remembered the strange effect the alien sunshine created.

Kirk thought for a moment, as though he'd changed his mind, then blurted out the words almost shamefully.

"Bones, the Enterprise -- have you heard anything...?"

Taken aback, McCoy could only gently admonish his friend. "No, Jim. Starfleet Command is not in the habit of confiding in former chief medical officers as to the disposition of damaged starships!"

Disappointed, Kirk persisted.

"I want you to find out what is going on. I must know what happened to the survivors, and the ship; and if they've done anything about locating...."

"Jim, you're not in a position to worry about the crew -- there are more experienced, qualified people to handle that problem. Your responsibility now is to get well."

Kirk leaned back in his wheelchair helplessly. "I'm not going to get better, Bones, you know that, I know that, and the doctors know that. Why do you think I'm here?" He rubbed his eyes crossly. "I'll never see again and I'll never be of any use to anyone -- ."

"Don't talk like that, Jim," McCoy chided gruffly. "It doesn't do any good, and besides," he added bitterly, "it doesn't make me feel any better either!" He stared balefully at the yellow grass.

"I'm sorry, Bones. I just don't seem to be able to control my frustrations any more. And if you know what's good for you, you'll quit malingering for the benefit of this blind bum and get on to bigger and better things."

McCoy winced, the vehemence of the other's words catching him painfully off guard, and for a moment he could think of nothing to say. Kirk, however, went on almost brusquely.

"You're a good doctor, Bones, better than most in my opinion, and you belong on a starship." He gestured feebly upwards, towards an unseen sky. "You should be out there, somewhere, hovering over a novice starship captain and badgering an alien...science officer...." The rebuke died and McCoy realized that it was the first reference either of them had made to Spock. Kirk, recovering, plunged on.

"There were times, Doctor, when you made the difference between success and failure, times when you held a wounded crew together through sheer willpower. I never knew the reason why, although I know that you suffered from some very painful memories and had adopted the crew of the Enterprise as a surrogate family. I was very grateful for the fact, more than once--"

He broke off helplessly then, his mouth working with self-deprecation.

"You don't deserve to be burdened with a broken-down starship captain's problems, Dr. McCoy. You've paid your dues in full. And if it hadn't been for the hope that you could help find -- ."

"Jim," McCoy interrupted plaintively, "I'm rather limited as to what I can do!"

"I shouldn't have asked, Bones; forgive me."

No, no, Jim, that's not the problem; I'm glad that you asked me. I

just have to figure out how to go about.... There might be someone who can pull some strings for us. Gordon might be able to help," he added under his breath, thoughtfully.

"Gordon?" Kirk queried, mildly hopeful.

"An old classmate of mine, Jim. He is the director of medicine on Starbase 27 where we -- the survivors of the ship were taken. I don't know how much influence he has with Starfleet; however," McCoy's eyebrows lifted in speculation, "there might be a former patient or two of mine who might be of some help." He shifted uncomfortably on the hard garden bench. "But don't get any hopes up yet, Jim. That damage report was pretty conclusive. The service is pretty thorough about its investigations, you know. It took them weeks just gathering the initial information. Anyway, missing-in-action out in the middle of the galaxy is pretty definite!"

Kirk nodded slowly, lapsing into a discouraged silence again. McCoy studied him apprehensively. The outburst had been of unmistakable significance; but had they slipped forward or backward?

"I think I'd like to go back to my room please." The request was curtly final, and McCoy rose regretfully to push the wheelchair back along the path toward Kirk's room.

Although Kirk didn't mention the subject again, McCoy thought about their conversation for days, mulling over the mystery of what had happened to the Enterprise and her crew. Starbase 12 was a long way from Earth, deliberately selected as a rehabilitation center for those who needed no reminders of a former life. Painful memories could be forgotten more easily on a distant planet with the unfamiliarity of blue sunshine and yellow grass. The sterility of the hospital environment was effectively nullified by the warmth of the well-trained attendants -- most of whom were also seeking a new life free of former ties. Here, one's inner characteristics would be appreciated, and immovable limbs and impaired minds could exist comfortably in the limbo of a closed community. Friendships evolved between patients with similar disabilities; one could not walk the halls without dispensing a compassionate word or smile among the exiled remnants of catastrophe.

Kirk hadn't formed a liason of empathy with any other patient. McCoy learned of the attendants' disappointment in their prestigious patient a few weeks after he'd arrived. The nurses were politely informative, explaining that their suggestions to Kirk had been rebuffed too many times and their administrations accepted listlessly and mechanically.

"We're here to help him do what he can't for himself. But he doesn't seem to want to do anything to help himself," one nurse sadly confessed to McCoy. "He simply doesn't want to recover!"

Nonetheless, in the weeks that followed McCoy continued to wait on his patient dutifully, but with the growing suspicion that Kirk was beginning to depend upon him too much. The walks were turning into habit, meals into lectures of nutritional lectures, and afternoons in the courtyard -- a vignette of two friends growing old together. It was time for a change, McCoy decided, and only he could make it happen.

The sub-space message to Starbase 27 took two hours transit and it was three more hours before Gordon's answer returned. McCoy was slightly heartened by its contents.

"Greetings, old friend. Had hoped your message would indicate a desire to return to this base for the position I had suggested. However, your



recommendation of a change of scene for your patient has been reviewed and found to be sound. Since the doctors on Starbase 12 have accomplished very little as evidenced by your report, I concur with discontinuing present therapy. Have forwarded your complaints to Drs. Metcalf and Trezand, and think you will be hearing from them shortly. Let me know how things turn out?" There was more dealing with contacts McCoy could try in regard to information about the ship, and further admonition to reconsider the job offer of diagnostician. But McCoy skimmed the rest rapidly and tucked the tape carefully into his travel bag for further reference.

One hour later he was summoned to Metcalf's office.

Renard Trezand was already seated near the cluttered desk, his eyes dark with displeasure. Dr. Metcalf gestured impatiently as McCoy hesitated in the doorway, reproach evident in the elderly doctor's petulant tone.

"Come in please, Leonard." He indicated a chair opposite the desk and waited until McCoy had arranged himself carefully before continuing. "I'm sure you are aware of the reason for this meeting? Apparently there is some question as to your friend's condition, and we are here to discuss it."

McCoy eyed the other two cautiously, wondering what Gord had said in his message to Metcalf. "There is no dilemma as I see it, just no recent, discernible improvement."

"Nevertheless, we have received a pertinent communication from Starbase 27 from," Metcalf glanced down at his desk uncertainly, "Gordon Paulson. He was responsible for admitting and diagnosing Captain Kirk following the ...er... mishap?" The elderly physician coughed softly and glanced apprehensively towards Trezand who was staring belligerently at McCoy. "He mentioned that you were unhappy with the situation and suggested we try a different approach. However, since it may affect the integrity of our eminent psychiatrist, Dr. Trezand, the matter must be discussed by all three of us -- hopefully, in the best interests of the patient."

McCoy waited respectfully for Trezand to respond -- he was here to defend, not to attack. Trezand regarded him imperiously.

"I cannot allow any further interference in the treatment of my patient, Dr. McCoy. You have already been given far too much leniency with Kirk, in my opinion, and his failure to respond dramatically does not warrant the completely irrelevant inference by Dr. Paulson. He is no longer in charge of the case; I am!"

McCoy smiled icily. "When I arrived here several months ago, Doctor, there were no outward signs of progress in your patient's attitude or reactions. He was reticent, uncooperative, and suffering from the next thing to malnutrition according to the records. Now he is more alert, eating better, responding to simple suggestions and even engaging in conversation occasionally. I'm a surgeon, not a psychoanalyst, gentlemen, but I call that indicative of a desire on the patient's part to improve -- if given the proper treatment!" He leaned back gingerly, bracing for the other's rebuttal. We might lose the battle, Jim, but we're going down fighting, he reflected grimly.

"You may take all the credit, Dr. McCoy," Trezand gritted angrily. "But the truth of the matter is that while you were plying your homespun technique, I have been using a new drug on Kirk. Has it ever occurred to you that my regimen might have contributed to the slight changes in the patient?"

"Maybe so," McCoy acknowledged easily. "But none of the other chemotherapy worked before I got here and I have no reason to believe that this one is working either!"

"That's only your opinion, Doctor!" Trezand snapped loftily, glancing

smugly at Metcalf. "The drug hasn't been given enough time to -- ."

"Three months isn't enough time? If I remember correctly, 'back in the good ole days'," McCoy drawled pointedly, "we changed medication after three weeks if it didn't provide dramatic improvement. I wouldn't say that Kirk's condition has improved dramatically, would you? He's still blind," he added in quiet hostility.

"Psychiatric therapy takes an indeterminate amount of time, Doctor; I wouldn't expect you to understand that, of course," Trezand growled insultingly.

"You've treated Kirk for a total of six months, Dr. Trezand," McCoy pointed out severely. "Even the most accomplished psychiatrists would agree that in this day and age half that time should be adequate to achieve a positive graph." He shook his head wonderingly at the other two. "Even the attendants on the wing have admitted that Kirk's mental attitude took a turn for the better only after I arrived. And your drugs and other therapy seemed to have made him worse!"

"Attendants do not have the training to diagnose patients," Metcalf shook his head reprovingly at McCoy, his hands fluttering typically among the papers on his desk. "Surely you are aware of that? Their observations can only be taken as one point of view, helpful in some cases but certainly not decisive. However, I'm sure they meant well -- ."

"Dr. Metcalf," Trezand interrupted disgustedly, "this discussion is going nowhere. Let's get to the heart of the matter, namely Dr. Paulson's unauthorized intercession and our own decision as to the suggested change of treatment. Explain to Dr. McCoy that at the present time we can't possibly sanction -- ."

"Did Dr. Paulson spell out my intentions?" McCoy interrupted impatiently. "I thought not," he nodded into the silence, then went on brusquely. "In any case, I agree with Dr. Trezand -- let's stop pussy-footin' around and get to brass tacks. In view of your obvious intentions to reject my suggestions, I wish to point out that I'm prepared to take my pleas all the way to the chief of Starfleet's Medical Division if necessary."

"Leonard," a paling Metcalf put in unhappily, "we realize your closeness to Captain Kirk has prompted you to form some unpleasant opinions about his therapy. But you can be assured that we have used the latest technology available to provide the most effective results." He sighed thoughtfully. "Nevertheless, we are always totally open to consideration of other techniques, and we invite you to present any valid procedure that might be considered -- ."

McCoy rose impulsively to face the other two with barely controlled anger. "James Kirk is my friend. He is also my former commander, and one of the most highly regarded Starfleet officers in Federation history. My proposal takes into account all of those facts, gentlemen, and if you will put aside your own professional resentment for a moment, I will explain why I believe my idea will produce the results we have all been hoping for. Dr. Metcalf, Dr. Trezand," he announced calmly, "I intend to take Captain Kirk back to Earth with me, specifically, to San Francisco and the surroundings that will remind him of a happier, more productive life."

"You can't do that!" Trezand objected, jumping to his feet, his face purpled with rage. "He's my patient and I won't allow -- ."

"As far as I'm concerned," McCoy interrupted tersely, "he's still under my jurisdiction as Chief Medical Officer of the Enterprise. There have been no orders to the contrary and I will defend my authority against any civilian medical council of inquiry that you choose to select...."

His eyes were blazing with blue sparks of determination and Trezand

and Metcalf faltered into shocked silence. Lieutenant Commander Leonard McCoy, former chief medical officer of the USS Enterprise, had had the last word, again.

Several days later, two uniformed starship officers, one in a wheelchair, boarded a shuttlecraft to a passenger liner orbiting Starbase 12. It hadn't taken much to convince Kirk of his friend's intentions and packing had taken even less time. There was a note of wistful hope in Kirk's voice as they entered the shuttlecraft and found seats.

"It will feel good to be back in space again, Bones, even if it is just to go home."

"Amen to that, Captain."

## CHAPTER 5

# THE KLINGONS

He'd been relieved to retire from the bridge and closet himself in his quarters. The dispatch had arrived when the ship touched the perimeter of surface to vessel receiver range, and although it had been marked "confidential", he was sure that Kotaan had surreptitiously deciphered it. The young Klingon officer's face had been grimly noncommittal when he'd handed the tape to his commander and announced its origin.

"A communique for you, sir, from Commander Kalauq." He had then dutifully returned to his console to immerse himself in his duties.

Kodor frowned imperceptibly, glancing around the bridge to see if any of the crew had noticed his subordinate's disapproval, whereupon he slipped the metal disk quickly into his sash. A few moments later the duty watch changed and he'd turned the con over to Kahlor with a curt nod.

He sat quietly before his personal viewer for several minutes before inserting the tape and activating the review switch. Kalauq greeted him impersonally from the screen and Kodor felt the usual shiver of trepidation even as he reminded himself that the face was only a recorded image.

After a perfunctory welcome, Kalauq recited several military revisions involving personnel and weaponry. But the crux of the cable he'd reserved for last.

"I'll expect you to report to P'Yhlarra as soon as you obtain orbit -- we have much to discuss, little brother." The tape had ended on that imperative note; Kalauq had called him home.

At first Kodor was puzzled, worried, then angry. He'd completed a dangerous assignment successfully and there'd been no mention of it in Kalauq's brusque message. Of course, the Supreme Warrior had probably not been informed of their difficulties, as there had been no time to release an emergency report pod.

His head aching with foreboding, Kodor paced his cabin alone, considering the impulse to transmit a negative reply. After months of roaming the edges of Klingon space he suddenly felt trapped again, and rebellion stirred uncharacteristically deep within him.

How long will I be subjected to this fear -- when will I divest myself of this inhibiting melancholia! It has something to do with Kalauq, but how can I accuse him? There is documented proof that he values my life....

Confused and restive, he'd flung himself back into the chair in front of

the viewer and replayed the tape, studying the face of his mentor for clues in the command to report to P'Yhlarra. It was not his home; it belonged to Kalauq, a trophy for his achievements in conquest. Kodor was not sure just what had ensued in that respect, but reports of his guardian's exploits had become history, especially at the Academy, and Kodor had benefited unquestionably from his relationship to the infamous Klingon.

But now the Emptor was Kodor's home, and thus he felt no compulsion to take up residence with the other, behaving as the grateful kinsman. He had made a place for himself in Klingon society and although Kalauq had been largely responsible for his initiation, the ultimate accomplishments had been his own.

His thoughts always returned to his unknown past. He had only Kalauq's reassurance to subdue the doubts and terrors of his nightmares. Vague suspicions that Kalauq knew more of his origins than he'd disclosed had persisted; many times Kodor had felt a strange discomfort among the emotionally expressive Klingons, as though the unrestrained laughter or anger around him represented a violation of some sort.

After a time he managed to control his distaste at emotional excesses; however, his lack of substantial memories continued to plague him. Once he had asked to return to the mountain home Kalauq had described to him ineffectually and the Klingon had studied him with a queer smile, stating absently that a landslide had destroyed all traces of his boyhood home. And so he was left with only the uneasy recollection of the laboratory, with all prior experiences gained through hearsay.

After rehabilitation there had been the Academy; and he had done as Kalauq advised, working at peak capacity to attain the honors and recognition necessary to command the second most important ship in the Klingon fleet. Kodor, the Vulcan, had proved his abilities again and again in simulated and actual battle conditions despite the void in his mind and the absence of a past.

Why am I so intimidated by having to face Kalauq alone again! He fought against the foreboding unsuccessfully, pacing the confined limits of his cabin. I should welcome this opportunity to greet him on an equal footing -- I should look forward to receiving his approval! But there is something about our relationship...something from the past that I can't quite comprehend.... His thoughts ended with a painful sensation of emptiness that left him breathless and shaken with effort. His mind had balked at the edge of a horror so intense that his skin crawled in alarm and he shuddered suddenly in abject terror!

In the end, Klingon imprinting battling with Vulcan perspective, Kodor mustered Kahlor and Kootaan to his quarters, requisitioning the comfortable familiarity of their friendship and conversation. And over glasses of wine, the three had relaxed into their former camaraderie, one that had evolved in the months of circumscription into mutual respect and admiration.

When Kahlor and Kootaan had first boarded the Emptor they'd worn a silent pride as they studied and performed next to him, exercising with subtle precision the maneuvers and war games of deep space finals. They had worked as a successful team and as such, had realized the unique ability to coordinate timing and reactions to a fine point. After Kodor had initiated briefings in his quarters during the first run from Khaz, an instinctive rapport developed that eventually crossed subliminal barriers of commander



and subordinates. The Dalanxi incident sealed the unspoken pact.

The thunderous surprise attack by Dal fighters had unseated him from his command chair and thrown his semi-conscious body against loosened instruments on the bridge. Both of the executive officers had been there when it happened, and they had watched helplessly as he'd ricocheted from one side of the deck to the other, his blood staining the perimeter of their vision. Impulsively, the two of them had unfastened their own restraints to scoop him up gently and transport him bodily to the medics. Kodor had been conscious during all of it, even while the doctors had pinched him together with their fingers, hastily taping his wounds shut to curtail the bleeding. With power gone on all lower levels, the healers had been reduced to employing primitive first aid, the sophisticated surgical tools useless and abandoned.

He'd insisted upon returning to the bridge, reluctantly accepting their assistance; and along the way he'd assigned them to emergency duties, unwilling to relinquish command while the battle still raged. Despite his pain, he'd plunged into action, reinforcing firepower to retaliate against the brutal pounding the ship was just barely withstanding. He sent Kahlor and Kotoan to direct repair crews while he bellowed commands at stunned crewmen who had become paralyzed under the prospect of immediate doom. Shortly after he regained the bridge, Emptor torpedoes and phasers blitzed holes through the armada of alien craft, Kodor's outspoken determination and encouragement bolstering the flagging impetus of a terror stricken crew.

Several hours later as the Emptor limped towards home, he'd confided an enigmatic reasoning: "I have an imperative destiny and cannot allow myself to be diverted by mere physical impediments."

The other two had shaken their heads in amusement, unsure as to whether he'd been serious or simply making light of his heroism.

He'd confined himself to his quarters temporarily on the advice of the doctors, his face and hands heavily bandaged. Most evenings after they'd finished double shifts of bridge duty, the two younger officers withdrew into his conference area to review the daily log and share his wine and conversation. They were aware that the easy compatibility would continue only until the ship returned to Khaz; permanent relationships were stringently discouraged within the constant shifting of military echelons. And Kotoan expressed rueful chagrin at the navigator's announcement of approaching orbit around Khaz.

Kodor had resumed full command duties the day before Kalauq's communication had arrived, and he'd begged off the usual evening's briefing to attend to the personal matter. But he'd summoned them finally, needing the diversion against his own misgivings. They'd been in his presence only moments before recognizing his distress, and with subtle finesse, had probed the motivation.

Through all the ensuing discussion, the subject always returned to Kalauq. He was the pivot, Kahlor had asserted as he'd cautioned Kodor quietly.

"Don't go, Kodor. Don't return to Kalauq's lair."

The warning had been friendly but Kodor couldn't miss the hardness in the other's look. He shrugged ambiguously and had shaken his head.

"It would only create dissension. Besides, he may give me news of the unconfirmed invasion."

His offhand reference inspired widespread speculation over the Supreme Warrior's plans and they finished the wine preoccupied. Much later the two Klingons exchanged glances as they prepared to leave. And once again





Kahlor quietly implored his senior officer.

"Don't obey the order to go to P'Yhlarra, sir. The ship will be going into drydock in two days and the crew will be beaming ashore for leave or transfer. Kotaan and I are planning to visit our families and friends for a few days -- why don't you come with us? Let us show you the far side of the planet -- you've already become fairly familiar with the capital city and the military village. A most important commander like yourself should acquaint himself with the entirety of his homeland. Anyway," he chuckled, "you could probably use an unreconstituted meal by this time!"

Kodor grimaced appropriately at the slanted allusion to shipboard food. But the Vulcan declined quietly, insisting that his responsibility lay with the ship, to ensure proper refurbishment of engines and weaponry and to make sure "all the dents are pounded out thoroughly!" He stood to signal dismissal and they knew the futility of further argument on the matter.

"I shall return to the ship before either of you leave in order to review final log entries and ready the ship for drydock. If there is anything new happening on the planet's surface, I will have that information for you also."

Kahlor sighed heavily and returned his empty glass to the sterilizer. "We would really prefer that you come with us, Commander, but since you feel duty bound to remain with the ship, we won't try to dissuade you. If we are fortunate enough to be reassigned to the Emptor, we may have news of our own to report."

Kodor glanced at him sharply but the other shook his head. "Not now, Kodor. Trust us, we will explain when we meet again. In the meantime, if you should decide to beam down for a day or two, let us know and we will meet you. Take care on your trip to P'Yhlarra, Commander." And they left the cabin quietly.

The house was almost hidden in the surrounding shrubbery, its anonymity emphasized by late evening gloom. At first Kodor expected no response to his knock since the place appeared dark and deserted, but the summons was reluctantly answered by the somber figure of a servant. Kodor introduced himself to the reticent sentinel only to be humbly ushered into a large study just off the hallway. The servant mumbled something to the effect that Kalauq would join him shortly, and then backed out of the room with a stiff bow.

Kodor had not been in the study before, his previous visits cut short by the demands of a military schedule. The chamber was softly illuminated by a flickering wall lamp, and sumptuously furnished for a member of the warrior class, Kodor reflected in surprise. Studying the number of artifacts displayed on shelves that reached from floor to ceiling and flanked the room to the stone fireplace at the other end, Kodor searched for the correct term to describe his initial impression. A puzzling coinage of unknown origin surfaced. Interesting!

Skirting heavily carved furniture, he approached the fireplace circuitously, suppressing an involuntary shudder at the stares of stuffed animal heads above him. He examined the weapons more closely, noting that they were apparently antiques, then moved to inspect several books which dealt with Klingon history and military conquest. He had never seen such well preserved volumes, and he marveled that Kalauq had acquired them. A few evidenced a variety of doctrinal theories on various cultures within the galaxy, some of which he had mastered in the Academy, while others covered agra-economic demand/supply topics.

As he moved towards the well-used hearth, a large framed portrait over

the center of the mantel caught his attention, and for a moment he wondered why he hadn't noticed it before. The subject appeared to be a Klingon warrior, judging from the dark uniform and well-decorated chest. But for the arrestingly hypnotic stare that seemed so disturbingly familiar, it could have been Kalauq in his youth. Kodor knew with unreasoned certainty that it wasn't -- the chin was narrower, and the mouth too generous to be Kalauq. Yet there was definitely a family resemblance.

Disquieted, he glanced around the room again and perceived that the entire scheme seemed to deliberately focus on the picture above the mantel. He sniffed carefully at a small container beneath the portrait and realized that it contained the remains of a candle that had recently been burned. The eerie atmosphere of the room was becoming unnerving, its silence comparable to that experienced in the presence of a shrine; he glanced at the somber face again, conscious of the elusively magnetic eyes that made his legs tremble with the urge to bolt into the comparative safety of the hallway.

He stood transfixed, unable to move until a chill swept down his back, the hair rising on the nape of his neck. Muscles responded in his desperation then, whirling defensively at the sound behind him. Kalauq stood in the doorway, peering uncertainly at him in the half-light.

"Is it you, Kodor? Welcome home, little brother! We have been apart too long -- I hardly recognized you!"

He stared intently at the paralyzed Vulcan before reaching out to trace the long scar that ran from one feathered eyebrow to the corner of an arrogant mouth.

"And how did you come by that?" The Klingon surveyed his adopted kinsman slowly, noting the other's obvious unease.

"Just as I acquired this...." Kodor managed to gasp, extending his scarred hand as his pulse gradually returned to normal. Kalauq bent over the twisted extremity and examined it closely. "Battle scars, Kalauq...in defense of our empire...." the Vulcan finished quietly.

"The Dalanxi!" Kalauq looked up in admiration, a slow smile creasing his swarthy features. "I heard about the battle. You did well, my brother!" He signalled Kodor to follow him down a hallway which led into a small sitting room at the other end.

It was a bright, cheerful place with warm lighting and cushioned furniture; Kodor reflected on the unaccountable differences from the study he'd just left.

Kalauq motioned him to sit but Kodor declined guardedly.

"I cannot stay long. The ship is in temporary orbit and we will be entering Drydock 7 shortly after I return. I came at your request."

He started as the Klingon clapped his hands to summon a servant. Drinks and food appeared almost simultaneously and Kalauq silenced Kodor's refusal by thrusting a glass of amber liquid at him imperiously. Seconds later the servant disappeared and Kalauq dropped carelessly into a nearby chair.

"There is nothing wrong, Kodor," he assured the wary Vulcan, taking up the thread of conversation again. "I merely wanted to bring you up-to-date."

Kodor nodded politely, nibbling on a small fruit as the Klingon gathered his thoughts together with apparent effort. There were dark circles under Kalauq's eyes and Kodor felt rather than saw the worry permeating the other's expression. Kalauq frowned and sighed to himself.

"I have been following your progress, little brother, despite all indications otherwise. I am pleased that you have distinguished yourself so



admirably."

Kodor bowed imperceptibly at the compliment, put down his glass and clasped his hands behind his back with impatience. He wanted to urge the older officer to get to the point but realized there would be no moving him until he was ready to speak.

"Of course, with your superior abilities, it was inevitable that you would excel in everything. Now that you have completed battle training and have confirmed your own command position over and above running errands for the Empire, I have concluded that the time has come to admit you to the most important military campaign ever attempted by our fleet: invasion of the Federation. I have been waiting until I thought you were practiced enough to assist us, and your recent performance has proven you worthy."

Kodor stirred uneasily, acknowledging the Klingon's final approval with starched dignity. But something tugged at his consciousness disconcertingly, a nagging distrust...no, a stronger feeling. Hostility! He was suddenly aware of a strong aversion to the Supreme Warrior's reference to invasion of the Federation, and even more so at the idea that he, Kodor, would take an active part.

"The Federation: an alliance of friendly planets encompassing a large portion of the galaxy, maintaining cooperation militarily as well as promoting friendly trade and diplomatic associations including the planet of brimstone, Vulcan." The words crawled through his agitation, the memory of an Academy history text returning with unrelenting clarity. The large, neighboring Federation was described further as consisting of a selfishly wealthy group of aliens who excluded neighboring territories because of unwillingness to recognize lesser kingdoms' inherent rights. Why then did he feel a strongly negative reaction when invasion was mentioned? He should be proud of his adopted nationality and reject his illogical, emotional doubts as clearly unfounded.

"I realize, sir, that you have contributed to my successful advancement by opening certain doors at the proper time. However, I also believe that my future depends on my own initiative, and I have attempted to prove my loyalty in every endeavor." He stared boldly at the older Klingon.

Kalauq leaned back in the chair to regard his visitor affectionately. "And with much recognition, Kodor. You do honor to the family of Vscenzenztu as well as to your foster homeland, and the future holds much promise for both of us. If all goes well, I hope to -- ."

"Indeed," the Vulcan interrupted almost pleasantly and one eyebrow rose slowly in amusement. "I have learned of your ambitions, Kalauq, and there are many who question them!"

Kalauq closed his eyes and was still for a moment. "There will come a time when we shall rule the galaxy together, you and I." The words were spoken so softly that Kodor had to lean forward to catch the rest.

"Together we are invincible, little brother. Together we will conquer the unconquerable and take our rightful places as princes of the realm. You will have much power...dominion over a new race...."

Kodor gazed at him in growing consternation. The Klingon's face had hardened into an evil smile and he stroked his neatly trimmed beard almost convulsively.

He is either drunk or hallucinating! A new race...? Kodor stifled his contempt as the other's eyes flicked open to regard him curiously.

"If we are to overpower the galaxy we must plan our strategy carefully, My Lord," he asserted coldly. "Is that why you asked me here this evening?"

"That was one of the reasons. There is growing impatience in the Ruling Council -- I have promised them victory and they are demanding deadlines!" The Klingon exhaled heavily, rubbing his forehead savagely in frustration as he mentally contemplated the sudden wrong turn in the conversation. His Vulcan ward frowned, puzzled.

"I have obeyed you at every turn, Kalauq. If there is something wrong...if I have erred...?"

"No, no, Kodor -- it is nothing you have done. But I must reorganize my arguments." He looked hesitantly at the other for a moment as though reconsidering his decision. "I find it necessary to transfer you to the Aerrex." The quiet words fell with an air of finality and Kodor bristled instinctively, stiffening automatically to attention. Kalauq seemed not to notice, however, and rose from his chair to pace the room while the Vulcan's face subtly altered from shock to mutinous rebellion.

"Permission to speak, sir," Kodor ground out hoarsely. But Kalauq curtly brushed aside the request.

"I need your expertise close at hand in the upcoming forays into the Neutral Zone and territories beyond." He faced his protege with hands on his hips, determination in his words. "We will be going farther into Federation space than ever before, into unknown exposure, and I want you on board my ship!"

Kodor remained at attention, his lips thinly pressed into disapproval. "Permission to speak, sir," he repeated tersely.

Kalauq nodded with some surprise noting for the first time that his guest was furious, glints of repressed irritation flashing from the narrowed eyes.

"I have trained for many months in preparation for commanding the Emptor, with special emphasis on her redesigned capacities."

"Another officer will be assigned to that command," Kalauq interjected bluntly.

"No other officer is eligible to specifically understand the newly reworked intricacies of the Emptor -- sir!" Kodor shot back angrily. "The Aerrex requires a powerful back-up to defend her flanks, more so when traveling deep into enemy territory. Without the flagship to direct and command, the fleet will be divided and disposed of within a matter of minutes -- you know that!" Kodor had become visibly agitated at the other's seeming indifference.

"Furthermore," he went on in his impassioned plea, "without a superior escort ship to guard her, you would be seriously jeopardizing Aerrex's vulnerable position at the rear of the formation. Without the Aerrex you would be seriously jeopardizing the success of the mission!" He'd spat out the words hotly, aghast at his own audacity, then plunged on hell-bent until the Supreme Warrior gaped at him in wonder.

"The Emptor is unique, and I have been trained to handle her. It would take months to prepare another to command her -- which would delay your plans for invasion. If the Ruling Council is already asking questions...?" He let the accusation hang between them meaningfully as Kalauq resumed his restless pacing, mulling over the Vulcan's unexpected objections. The ensuing silence thickened with overtones of anger, logic and rationalization.

Finally, "You are right, of course, Commander." Kalauq sighed heavily, folding his arms across his chest to gaze respectfully at his new found opponent. The Vulcan had challenged him logically and Kalauq knew that he had to restore the semblance of authority quickly.

"I must confess that my real reasons were more...personal ones, little

brother." He turned towards the window to stare out into the darkness beyond. "I wanted you close to me where I could keep an eye on you -- to protect you if need be. But you have proved yourself in battle quite effectively and I would do better to count on your protection, as you have so accurately pointed out to me." The Klingon smiled coldly as he returned to his chair. Kodor remained silent, the old uneasiness stalking his confidence annoyingly.

But the Klingon changed gears unexpectedly.

"There will be a meeting of the War Council to discuss strategy pertinent to the invasion. The conference is scheduled seven days from now in the War Department briefing room at the Defense Ministry complex. I expect you to be there!" The order was unmistakably harsh. Kodor stared back grimly.

"And you will, at all times, exemplify your conduct by observing strict military protocol. If requirements are made of you and your ship, they will be carried out unquestioningly." The implication was clear; he would exact cooperation from the younger officer in front of experienced military advisors, and there would be no further tolerance of insubordination for any reason.

"I understand," Kodor nodded gravely. "However, my crew is combat-ready to all specifications and our record will stand on its own."

Kalauq tapped his fingers on the arms of his chair, his face dark with suppressed annoyance. He had planted a seed that had grown bitter fruit.

"Before we embark on our glorious mission you must report for a long overdue check-up, Kodor. It has been many months since the last visit and the doctors have, no doubt, wondered -- ."

"That will not be necessary," Kodor broke in quickly. "I was quite thoroughly examined following the battle with the Dalanxi. The ship's doctor pronounced me fit for duty with no complications except for the scarring which could be corrected later. There is no need to return to the laboratory for more tests; I have resigned myself to the fact that my memory shall never return."

He relaxed tentatively, half-fearful that the other would not accept his unconditional logic. The memory of white, gowned figures in a dimly lit laboratory sent a mental shudder through him, and he blinked back the veiled dread doggedly.

"Also, my schedule is exceedingly tight and cannot accomodate unnecessary interruptions. I'm sure the doctors would understand."

Kalauq frowned in consternation, then threw up his hands in resignation. There would be time for alternatives later. He rose to move towards the hallway, signalling that the visit was over. Morosely, he led the way to the main entrance, disgruntled over the sudden defiance in his alien protege.

"I shall see you in seven days?" The question was more of a command, and Kodor responded with a faint nod, already impatiently bowing his farewell.

"Seven days."

He walked quickly to the waiting air car, its parking lights illuminating a small patch of ground around it. The short visit had left the taste of triumph in his mouth, and he smiled to himself as he reviewed the evening's interchange. Kalauq had seemed unusually tired and apprehensive, he reflected briefly, as though something had been amiss. Perhaps his plans had not worked out as he'd expected.

But the Emptor was still his! Kodor marveled with some astonishment at how he'd managed to assert himself before the Supreme Warrior -- and had avoided another stressful session at the laboratory. He'd experienced a small glimpse of freedom, and the occasion had given him new confidence,



boldly reinforcing the suspicion that his untenable position had become less binding. Perhaps there were alternatives after all.

Kahlor and Kootaan were waiting for him in the transporter room when he returned from the surface and, somberly, he led them back to his quarters for the final briefing. Ship's business was quickly concluded and Kodor broke out the wine to fill three glasses while he repeated the news of the scheduled meeting and affirmed the imminence of invasion against the Federation.

At length they'd inquired about Kalauq. But Kodor avoided mentioning the rebellious challenge he'd launched at the Supreme Warrior, reporting only that Kalauq had given him back the Emptor. The three exchanged elated glances at that and Kahlor smiled grimly at his two friends.

"I wish I'd been there!"

Kodor shook his head, rubbing his forehead uncertainly as he related a summary of the scene between the older Klingon and himself. Kahlor interrupted once to ask if Kalauq had given a reason for wanting Kodor on board the Aerrex but Kodor could not give him a rational answer.

Much later he recalled that he'd forgotten to mention the extraordinary portrait in the study.

The evening stretched through another bottle of wine and more discussion of the implications of war with the Federation. At last Kodor glanced at the chronometer and announced that it was time to retire.

"We will continue this conversation when you rejoin the ship in six days, gentlemen," he declared confidently, promising to sign them aboard early, ahead of the rest of the crew.

The next morning the young officers were gone and the ship floated into drydock.

The following six days were long ones. Kodor reviewed the ship's log and made corrections; he updated the weapons inventory, and inspected the food machinery. He supervised the renovation of the executive officers' rooms which would allow them more privacy; and he ordered several cases of regulation wine and spirits for his dwindling supply. The ship's engines were tested under his close scrutiny and new energy cells installed.

Late afternoon of the sixth day as the supply officer requested authorization to beam up a large container which had been requisitioned by Kahlor as "personal regulation furnishings." Kodor merely smiled to himself and acknowledged the request, making a mental note to chide Kahlor roundly for furnishing his new quarters before asking permission from his commander. The large box was deposited squarely between the Klingon's bed and his closet.

The rest of the time was spent wandering around the ship, watching the workers replace damaged panels and controls, and studying regulation military tapes on battle strategy. He meant to be on his toes at the council meeting.

Kahlor and Kootaan reappeared on time, strangely subdued, and Kodor acknowledged their salutes calmly before they disappeared to inspect the new executive quarters. The rest of the crew arrived in small groups, and for a

time, Kodor was busy logging in newcomers and assigning them to duty officers. He suspected that it inspired more cooperation by personally inspecting new members of the crew; and secretly, he rather enjoyed the startled recognition and fumbling salutes as novices took form on the transporter platform.

He scheduled a meeting in his office; and after ordering the transporter secured and signing the last report for the supply officer, he found his execs dutifully waiting for him. Kahlor was absorbed in the review of updated ship reports, and Kodor sat patiently until the tape had ended. After a perfunctory greeting, he inquired politely as to whether they'd enjoyed their shore leaves. Both nodded agreeably and seemed relieved to discuss the agenda on new personnel and reassigned non-coms.

At last there was a significant pause and Kodor relaxed slightly to lean back and study the other two as they, in turn, stared wearily back at him.

"All right, out with it. You said that you would have something to tell me when you returned. The briefing is concluded as of right now." His eyebrows rose slowly in the gathering tension until Kahlor sighed softly and leaned his elbows on the arms of his chair.

"We...found our families well and secure, Kodor," he hesitated as Kodor stared at him expectantly.

"And -- ?" Kodor prompted tautly.

"And we found some changes in our home settlement." Again Kahlor paused as Kodaan squirmed uncomfortably in the other chair.

"What kind of changes?" Kodor inquired politely, suspicion clouding his expression.

"Political changes, Kodor," Kahlor finished quietly. "Opposing political changes. Kalauq's preparations for war have confirmed the belief that our government has not performed in the best interests of the people." He sat very straight, weighing the other's reaction, and was rewarded with only a slight flicker of curiosity.

"There are those who wish to remedy that situation, of course?" Their commander's question was more of a statement, and the two Klingons murmured affirmation.

Kodor considered them sternly. "You understand that such a remedy might entail civil war?" They nodded mutely and he shook his head at them sorrowfully. "I did not realize that such a possibility existed within the Klingon society. I have been taught that allegiance to country and commander is absolute -- there are no other options! And power and conquest are necessary to maintain control. Is that not what you learned at the Academy?"

Kodaan had paled noticeably and he bowed his head, but Kahlor shook his angrily and leaned back to regard his commander grimly.

"We were well aware of the type of instruction we would receive at the Academy before we entered the institution, and we were warned not to be intimidated by such a doctrine."

"There has been an escalating dissatisfaction with our leadership for some time, Kodor. But Kalauq's recent rise to power has increased the general discontent." He paused again to assess the effects of his words upon the Vulcan. "No one was sure the boasts were genuine -- or that the Council would even listen to him! But his exaggerated promises blinded those in power, and many of us feel we can only expect complete expropriation of our Empire's assets for the combined greed of the Supreme Warrior and his companions."

The silence in the room deepened almost tangibly until Kodaan's explosive rebuke startled them back to attention.

"There can be no retreating from our decision, Kodor -- an upheaval is inevitable! We have one advantage on our side, so far," he insisted knowingly, "that of surprise. The governing officials suspect nothing. That is why we had to be so discreet...."

Kodor sat frozen to his chair. And I always thought of him as the peacemaker of the two! "And so your shore leaves involved something more than a mere visit to your families," he mused quietly. "you carried my news of the invasion back to the Klingon people."

Kahlor regarded his commander soberly. "Kotaan and I met with the underground leaders five days ago. The movement has already started. Secret bases are being constructed in the hills and many sympathizers are stockpiling supplies and weapons wherever they can find unused space." The Emptor's first officer gestured apologetically, his brows drawn together in a worried frown.

"We would have approached you earlier, Kodor, but we were hesitant because of your kinship to Kalauq. We had no reason to believe that you would side with us against him until your confession of Federation loyalties the night before you went to P'Yhlarra.

"And even after you returned, we debated your feelings toward the Supreme Warrior, wondering if you had been completely truthful with us. Our leader had instructed us to use extreme caution -- he is still convinced that you are a spy, planted in the fleet by that sly old bandit himself." Kahlor cleared his throat nervously and stared pointedly at the Vulcan.

"Are you a spy, Kodor?"

Kotaan looked from one to the other, his eyes widening in concern at the guarded confrontation.

Deliberately, Kodor's dark eyes warmed with amusement. And the corners of his mouth lifted gently.

"No, my friends, I am definitely not a spy. What I've told you is the absolute truth. I no longer owe allegiance to anyone, Kalauq included, and I am most intrigued by your revelation." He regarded them philosophically as his second and third in command slumped in relief.

Kahlor smiled wryly. "You see, Commander, why we couldn't confide in you before? As much as we respect you personally, we weren't certain just how you would react. And we had to confirm the progress of the underground movement -- communication is still transitory at best and we're really not well informed as to who is entirely trustworthy."

Kodor nodded, leaning his elbows on his desk to steeple his hands loosely. Kahlor, finally convinced of the Vulcan's sincerity, explained further.

"We also had to consider the possibility of relieving you of command of the Emptor if you were found to be sympathetic with Kalauq." He shrugged awkwardly at the Vulcan's subtle reaction. "It was an extreme option, of course; we were hopeful of persuading you to join us. And it would have been unfortunate had you rejected the idea...."

Kodor clasped his hands together carefully, his face composed impassively against the turmoil of his emotions. "I, too, have concluded that Kalauq is evil...and must be dealt with firmly. It would be...most gratifying to be a part of your undertaking, however it is resolved...." His voice dropped to a whisper and the other two were shocked by the sudden haunting pain in his eyes. Kotaan started to his feet and leaned across the desk to grasp his commander by the shoulders.

"Then join us, Kodor! We would welcome your help!" His eager pleas had the desired effect: Kodor's face softened noticeably at the younger Klingon's impulsive gesture of affection.

After a tense moment he removed the other's hands and rose to his feet to pace the small confines of the room. Embarrassed, Kotaan sank back into his chair and lowered his head. No one spoke for several minutes until Kodor had returned stiffly to his seat.

"Your cause is most intriguing, gentlemen, and I do not question your sincerity or dedication in the matter. Since there is no possible way I can gain confirmation without destroying your cover, I must take your word on trust alone." He examined each of them soberly. "Therefore, I accept your invitation, not only because you are friends, but because for the first time I recognize that my life could not be better spent than opposing tyranny."

Kotaan looked up and smiled crookedly. "I told you he would be with us, Kahlor," he breathed softly. Then more adamantly, "With the most invincible ship and commander in the fleet there is nothing we can't do!"

Kahlor patted his younger ally on the shoulder condescendingly and glanced uneasily at Kodor. "We have told you the most important part, Kodor, but there is more --."

Kodor stood again, almost leisurely, to control a curious feeling of exasperation. "You had better tell me quickly, Sub-Commander," he admonished faintly. "And if you can manage to be brief -- I find your disclosures more startling by the moment!"

Kahlor couldn't help a fleeting grin as he pulled himself respectfully erect. "Sir, I regret to inform you that while you are still officially in command of this ship, I am in command of the reactionary forces on board -- no disrespect intended, sir!"

Kodor nodded slowly, his face once again under control. "Acknowledged. And...?" he prodded perceptively at his first's expression.

"And as soon as you return from the War Council meeting we must arrange our priority assignment, sir."

"An underground mission...yes?" One eyebrow swept up inquiringly.

"We are to deliver a cloaking device -- that large box in my quarters -- ."

"A cloaking device?"

"Yes, to a pirate base."

The other eyebrow disappeared into the dark hair.

"A pirate base? And where is this pirate base," Kodor pressed patiently.

"On a remote planetoid near the Neutral Zone...."

Kodor digested that thoughtfully. "I would suggest amending your previous definition of 'priority' to 'extremely dangerous', Gentlemen! I am not acquainted with whomever designed your mission, Kahlor, but I'm certain that person is unfamiliar with space-oriented vehicles. I recommend we wait until I know more about the projected invasion plans before we engage seriously in any of our own." Kodor held up a hand to stem objections.

"We cannot afford foolish chances, Sub-Commanders. The cloaking device will be delivered...eventually. But if we are to be of some lasting use to the conspiracy to unseat Kalauq, we must use caution as well as courage. I will consider the mission carefully and explain the difficulties to you later. In the meantime," he eased wearily into his chair and leaned both elbows on his desk, "I suggest that you start at the very beginning and tell me all about your underground organization and the extent of its influence. We have," he glanced at the timepiece on his desk, "exactly one point four five hours...."

The War Council meeting was well organized and smoothly executed.



LATENA KAY  
KIDD © 84

Kalauq laid his scheme before all members, loudly emphasizing his convictions that victory would be theirs before the Federation knew what had happened. He scarcely acknowledged Kodor's presence, but Kodor knew that the Supreme Warrior was very aware of his ward's scrutiny.

The vote had gone twenty to two in favor of the invasion and later discussion centered mainly on strategy and implementation of weaponry and ships. Kalauq studiously avoided calling on Kodor for opinions, his glance passing over the Vulcan with deliberate disregard, the reason known only too well to both of them.

There had been no incentive for Kodor to remain after the official dismissal of the meeting; after paying appropriate respects to prominent members, he retreated swiftly to the ship. All of the fleet had been ordered to stay in port pending further orders, and Kodor and his executive officers debated quickly the most efficiently unobtrusive method of making the ship disappear.

Kalauq was scheduled to leave for Rom on a hastily arranged diplomatic errand hoping to convince the Romulans to join in the impending invasion. Since the Emptor had not been designated escort to the flagship in order to avoid any suggestions of coercion towards their Romulan neighbors, no one objected to Emptor's choice of the outermost mooring -- an advantageous position from which to overtake the Aerrex should she require assistance upon entering Romulan space. It was with amused gratitude that Kodor reflected on Kalauq's decision to make the journey alone, having convinced the Council that the escort ship's intimidating firepower would do more harm than good. Planning their flight had become less difficult as a result of his mentor's inadvertent support.

Kodor knew he could only slip away unnoticed during the diversion of the flagship's departure, and he built escape on that gamble. The Emptor's cloaking device had not been officially tested following the release from dry-dock, and a test run of the instruments would be a most convenient excuse should it be discovered the ship had left port against the direct orders of the Supreme Warrior. However, Kodor was counting on his relationship to Kalauq to give them another advantage -- he knew that he would be less likely to be discredited than any other in the fleet.

The plan of leaving orbit was almost too simple to go wrong, and the three conspirators mentally congratulated themselves as the ship sidled out of sensor range on the second day. It would take some time before the ship would be missed and the first conjecture might be that Kalauq had changed his mind at the last moment and ordered the Emptor to accompany him to Rom.

In any event, the die was cast; in the weeks ahead they would be vulnerable only during the re-energizing of the Emptor's own invisibility screens. The chances were slim that the ruse would give them more than a head start -- unless Kalauq chose not to return to Khaz as planned.



## CHAPTER 6

# KATE

The lights of San Francisco Bay twinkled through the gathering evening fog as Leonard McCoy stood in the living room of Kirk's apartment.

"It sure is good to be home, Jim," he sighed contentedly, looking out through the large plexipanes towards the city. "I just wish you could see the lights. If they ever tear down the Golden Gate Bridge, I'll sign up for permanent assignment on the farthest outpost!" He finished his habitual cocktail with one swallow and turned to the man in the wheelchair beside him. Kirk smiled ruefully.

"They'd be lucky to get you, Bones." He waved aside McCoy's automatic offer of another drink. "Maybe you could take me along -- I could always operate a data storage console or some such other unimportant duty."

The doctor frowned to himself, watching the blind man swing his chair around to position it expertly near the fireplace. The fact that Kirk was learning to get around by himself in the self-propelled, sensor-operated vehicle was comforting. But his resignation towards a life of darkness hadn't eased, and for the first time since they left Starbase 12 McCoy was frightened. If Jim became too dependent on a companion, he would never attempt to overcome the psychosis that was responsible for his blindness.

"Dinner's probably getting cold, Dr. McCoy," Kirk reminded him complacently, the firelight flickering eerily across his sightless eyes.

"Let's eat so Mary can clear away the table and we can tune in that quiz show you like so well."

Evenings had quickly become routine: the consumption of bland but tasty meals concocted by the versatile housekeeper, Mary; the selection of canned entertainment on the holovision; and later, reading aloud from one of the best sellers on the well-stocked book shelves in the living room. Kirk hadn't left the apartment in the six weeks since they'd returned to Earth, and McCoy had ventured into the city only to restock closets and the liquor supply. Suggestions of fresh air and sunshine in one of the parks had been met with firm refusal.

"I can get that on my patio, Bones. I don't need to go out in public to evoke sympathy. And there are plenty of other people to feed the pigeons...."

As a result, McCoy had racked his brain for weeks to find something

that would create a spark of animation in his patient. The day before he'd dropped in at the downtown library to check out a new medical reference that had piqued his interest, and it seemed as though providence had stepped in at last.

Doorbell chimes interrupted the silence of the living room and McCoy glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece.

"Who could it be at this hour?" Kirk wondered aloud. "If it's a salesman tell him we don't want any, but get rid of whoever it is. I'm hungry --."

"Oh, didn't I tell you, Jim?" Wary blue eyes brightened with feigned innocence to match the glib tone. "I asked Kate Porter to dinner. Bumped into her yesterday at the library -- accidentally --." The doorbell chimed again insistently. "You remember Lieutenant Porter, don't you?"

"Better answer the door, Bones," Kirk advised shortly. "You can explain later." Without bothering to wait, the former starship captain turned his wheelchair abruptly and headed towards the adjoining dining room.

"Right, Jim," McCoy murmured obediently over his shoulder, pulling open the door to greet their guest heartily. "Katie! Come on in. I do hope you're hungry for poached salmon? Mary makes the best!"

"I'm sorry I'm so late, Leonard," a feminine voice begged softly. "I got on the wrong airbus and had to come by another way."

"That's all right," McCoy soothed. "you're still in time. Come with me, we were just about to sit down to dinner." Taking her arm gently, he led the way to the table and seated the simply dressed young woman across from a disgruntled Kirk.

"Jim, this is Kate Porter. She used to be --."

"Yes, Dr. McCoy, I remember her," Kirk injected rudely. "Forgive me for not rising, Miss Porter, but this wheelchair is rather clumsy."

McCoy gaped at Kirk, aghast at his ill manners, but Kate hadn't seemed to have noticed. Instead, she smiled calmly and turned to direct silver-pupiled eyes towards her other host.

"That's quite all right, Mr. Kirk. Yes, we met on Starbase 10 several years ago, didn't we? I was waiting for a transport carrier to Starbase 9," she reiterated smoothly, "to regroup with a team of astronomers and astro-physicists."

Kirk acknowledged the memory curtly, and they sat around the table engaging in stilted chatter until the housekeeper entered the dining room with steaming plates of salmon and vegetables. She served each of them skillfully and placed a chilled bottle of wine next to McCoy's plate. Somewhat guiltily he filled three glasses and handed them to the others. The evening was fast becoming a small disaster.

"It smells delicious, Leonard," Kate offered hungrily. "How did you know that salmon is my favorite?" She sipped her drink tentatively and placed the glass carefully to the right of her plate. "And you made the proper selection too -- Chablis, isn't it?"

"Yes, Old California's best...." McCoy picked up his fork and pushed at his vegetables feebly. "And the asparagus is Jim's favorite," he insisted loudly watching Kirk chase a spear of it around his plate until it wedged against a slice of salmon.

"Mum-hum," Kirk mumbled, stabbing at his meat viciously to follow the asparagus. McCoy quickly downed his Chablis and tried not to notice.

The meal finished in silence and McCoy refilled the wine glasses. Kirk had managed to clean up his plate one way or another, McCoy observed, and had leaned back to wipe his mouth with his napkin, staring obediently in the

direction of their guest. Appetite appeased, his mood had apparently lightened considerably.

"I always wondered what a pretty young thing was doing with a bunch of old scientists out in that desolate area of space," Kirk mused almost politely, attempting to pick up the conversation again. "Your specialty was astrobiology, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was," Kate conceded slowly. "I had hoped to study beta-polar radiation effects on mutated specimens of invertebrates that I'd sent on ahead to our destination. The experiment was to provide data for my doctorate thesis on evolutionary metastases due to recycled radioactive fluctuations." She sighed regretfully, sipping the last of her wine pensively. "But every now and then fate has a habit of playing dirty tricks on the best of intentions."

"Kate is working in library sciences now, Jim," McCoy put in quickly. "And doing a fine job the way I hear it!" He patted their guest's hand fondly, hoping Kirk hadn't noticed the way he'd deliberately changed the subject. But Kate picked up the ball spontaneously.

"You'll have to visit the library complex where I work, Mr. Kirk. There are all kinds of audio references available --."

"Thank you, Miss Porter, but I can dial any selection I need from my own desk computer. There is no need to go into town to the library."

"But the data you have access to is over a year old! New books aren't programmed into the library's transmitter channels until they've been retaped and given an audio-visual evaluation code -- which may take months or years! Some of the stuff is obsolete by that time." She laughed, explaining a recent mix-up whereby a sequel had been programmed several months before the original text had been reviewed and catalogued.

Dessert brought on animated discussion of political events in recent weeks, and Kirk listened half-heartedly, inserting an opinion or two now and then at McCoy's prodding. Several hours later Kate announced that although she was enjoying the conversation immensely, she had an early date to keep with a computer and had to catch the last bus home. McCoy gruffly protested, insisting that he drive her home in a private air car. But she demurred, explaining patiently that she lived too far from the city for anyone to be subjected to a round trip in the middle of the night.

Kirk remained silently acquiescent, murmuring his pleasure in having chatted with her again and soberly listening to her cheerful leave-taking. McCoy promised to visit the library again soon and worried out loud about her returning home by herself.

"I'm used to going out at night by myself, Dr. McCoy," she countered blithely. "After all, nights are no different than days to me -- only less noisy. Thank you, gentlemen, for a delicious meal and good conversation. It's been a long time since I've been in the company of two such interesting men! Good night." And she was gone.

Kirk's realization of McCoy's deception filled the apartment with strained silence.

"Why didn't you tell me, Bones?" he wanted to know later, shrugging out of his robe.

"I wanted you to identify with someone else who was blind to remember that there are many others out there in the world with problems as great as yours," McCoy explained quietly. "She's a beautiful girl, Jim, and very plucky. When that star went nova prematurely the others were killed by simultaneous fire-storms. No one knows why she didn't die too. The rescue



team guessed that she had gone below several hours prior to the disaster to work on the other half of her project. When she finally determined what was happening, she managed to send out a frantic call for help. But by the time the rangers got there," he finished sorrowfully, "the planet was half a cinder and Kate was temporarily deranged."

"I never knew what happened," Kirk admitted lamely. "Oh, I'd overheard the usual scuttlebutt about 'another unsuccessful scientific pipedream going up in flames' but I didn't take it seriously -- and certainly didn't connect Kate Porter with the rumors. I had assumed that she was off in some other part of the galaxy chasing plants and animals." He fell silent as McCoy slammed the clothes chute lid and made sounds of opening the beds.

"She went through hell with the treatments for radiation, Jim," McCoy went on sadly. "Lost most of her hair and broke out in disfiguring splotches from the antidotes. Eventually she regained her health except for her sight. But she didn't let that stop her either -- ."

"I know, Dr. McCoy," the hazel-eyed human yielded softly. "She pitched in and reorganized her life."

McCoy pulled the covers gently around the other's chest, tucking in his patient as he had been doing for so many months. He didn't say anything more until he'd climbed into his own bed and turned out the light.

"Her problem is physical, Jim. Yours isn't. Think about it." And lulled by the hypnotic hum of the electronic sleep inducer, he was soon gently snoring.

Kirk didn't succumb for several hours; when he did, dreams of the Enterprise kept intruding doggedly. And sometimes he seemed to hear Spock calling to him through a wall of twisted metal and burning bulkheads. Over and over the same nagging suspicion tugged at his conscience. Spock is still alive...out there...somewhere. I must find him....

McCoy didn't notice the differences at first, the increase in appetite, the cheerful responses to his suggestions, the more frequent excursions about the apartment without the wheelchair for security. He continued to humor his patient in the same old ways, cutting his meat when Mary had forgotten, shaving him carefully every morning, and describing the holographic images of the quiz shows. When Kirk demanded a trip into the city two weeks after Kate Porter's visit, McCoy chalked it up to boredom. It wasn't until they'd arrived at the old downtown metrostation and Kirk announced his desire to "inspect" the library that McCoy reacted. And smiling optimistically, he'd listened courteously as Kirk, half-joking, justified his request.

"Miss Porter said they received hundreds of new tapes daily, Bones! Maybe there's something on how to get your space legs back without breaking them, or how to learn to speak Kzin in ten days -- ."

Whatever the reason, McCoy wasn't about to question it. He pushed the "taxi" button at the nearest transfer pod and directed the operator to take them to the library. Kirk negotiated the ramped escalator with aplomb but McCoy worried how they would manage without the wheelchair in the cavernous levels above the lobby. With a guilty start the doctor realized he hadn't been inside a main library for decades. It had been too easy to simply "dial up from the surface" whatever he wanted. As a result, his shipboard quarters had acquired an impressive library of his own. Now he remembered the massive building renovations for the severely handicapped that had become mandatory in the previous centuries, and soon had Kirk packed comfortably into a portable electronic chair that glided along tracks



in the floor.

Funny I didn't notice them before....

It was an all too brief but satisfying afternoon, and McCoy watched Kirk chatting with Kate Porter as though they'd known each other for years.

"He still has the old touch," McCoy muttered to himself with amusement, then shrewdly considered another aspect of the reunion. "If Kirk could forget himself for a little while with a woman...."

He shook his head ruefully. If Kirk regained his sight as a result of Kate's attentions, she would still be blind. And Kirk would feel guilty all over again. McCoy sighed. There was no easy solution to Kirk's problem. But if the proximity of a beautiful lady could trigger the necessary psychological response, McCoy was willing to gamble. Kate would understand, even though Kirk might not. It was a chance he would have to take.

They didn't hear his approach, his excuse to wander among the stacks having been merely that, and he cleared his throat loudly to announce his presence.

"You two sound as if you have a lot to talk about. How about coming back to the apartment with us, Kate? Mary has the night off but I'm sure I can rustle up something for the three of us -- if you don't mind cold chicken and leftover chocolate cake?" McCoy found her hand and squeezed it warmly to reinforce his invitation. Kate smiled up at him and McCoy thought for a moment that she was actually looking at him. But her eyes moved blankly to stare down at the desk in front of her as she gently removed her hand to shut off a buzzing summons from her supervisor.

"That would be Miss Kepple, notifying me that I have another customer. If you can wait a while longer, I'd love to take you up on your cold chicken?" Her fingers explored the braille clock embedded in the desktop and she rose to walk over to one of the floor-to-ceiling stacks. "My shift will be over in half-an-hour, Dr. McCoy. I'm sure you can find something to occupy your time?"

"We'll collect you in thirty minutes, Kate," McCoy assured her, cheerfully taking Kirk by the elbow to point him towards an audio booth across the room. He found a tape on holovision trivia for Kirk and another on classical surgical procedures of the twentieth century for himself, and became contentedly immersed in its study.

The cold chicken and chocolate cake disappeared with a collective sigh of appreciation, and afterwards McCoy shooed Kate and Kirk into the living room while he cleaned up. He took his time, switching on the stereo in the kitchen so the others wouldn't think he was listening to their conversation. But it didn't matter: Kirk was soon calling to him, asking for help in pushing back the furniture on the patio so they could dance. McCoy's eyebrows went up in surprise but he hurried to comply, marching Kirk around the perimeter slowly to gain his bearings before touching the button of sound on the patio wall. The eager young woman and the serious faced ex-starship captain faced each other somberly, and tentatively began moving to the music, nestling into a slow, rhythmic one-step while McCoy watched.

Kate seemed to sense the barriers whenever they got too near the railing or the wall, and Kirk half-followed, half-led their progress around the floor. The music faded and McCoy clapped good-naturedly. The next selection bounced loudly through the speaker. All three laughed at the impossibility of dancing to it, sighted or not, and McCoy led the way back to the living room.







There was no doubt about it, McCoy decided much later; Jim was very taken with the lovely librarian. His attitude mellowed steadily over the next few months as Kate became more of a habitue in the apartment than a guest. They seemed so comfortable with each other, McCoy decided, that it was hard for him to imagine their ever having been apart. Or ever being separate again.

Kirk's sensitivity to light became evident one morning six months after Kate Porter had entered their lives. At first he suspected it was just a quirk of his imagination and almost refused to let McCoy test him. But Kirk's reaction to the difference between the subdued light of the bedroom and the strong light on the patio was definite. As he had done for so long, McCoy steeled himself against over-confidence.

It may just be temporary; then again, it might be a genuine indication of returning sight. I will have to monitor Jim carefully over the next few weeks. And he'll have to stay out of bright sunlight until I determine whether or not it is progressive....

Kirk had been pathetically benign despite McCoy's initial enthusiasm, wringing his hands nervously during the other's gentle probing. And after the excitement had subsided, they'd gravely considered Kate's reaction. Kirk was adamantly cautious. "I'd rather not mention this to Kate just yet, Bones; it might upset her or get her hopes up for nothing. If I do get my sight back it will make no difference in the way I feel about her." He was very quiet for a moment and McCoy was about to change the subject.

"I intend to ask her to marry me, Dr. McCoy, whether you think it is wrong or not."

Two disconcerted blue eyes studied their companion uneasily. "What I think doesn't matter, Jim," McCoy granted soberly. "It will be up to you and Kate to decide what is best for both of you. However, if you do get your sight back and want to return to starship duty, will Kate be willing to let you go? That's something to contemplate too, Captain," he finished formally, walking over to the patio doors to stare out at the sprawling expanse of the city.

"Things will appear differently to you if that happens," McCoy continued dispassionately. "And the bond that you have in common with Kate will be gone. She might even resent your sightedness, refuse to be friends anymore. I've heard of similar --."

"We'll see, Doctor," Kirk cut in abruptly. "I love her very much, and I believe she loves me. Up until I met Kate a few months ago my life had become sand through an hourglass -- one moment following the other -- indistinguishable."

Neither of them spoke for a few moments, Kirk rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"Perhaps it's time I got married and settled down," he added shortly. "I'm not getting any younger, and all that roving around the galaxy --."

"You loved every minute of it, Jim," McCoy protested vehemently. "And if you marry and become tied down to a blind mate -- assume a responsibility that you can't turn your back on -- it will gnaw at you until it kills the very love that drew you together. But, as you say, we'll just have to wait and see...."

Kirk rose suddenly to grope his way into the bedroom and McCoy longed bitterly to recant his cruel declaration -- even though the words had been terribly correct and spoken with heartfelt concern. Kirk was tough enough

to survive; but how deeply would this turn of events affect Kate? McCoy's heart ached, heavy-laden.

The ship settled into orbit around the planetoid after one sweeping scan. X-410 was on the edge of neutral space, its location a poorly kept secret among military map-makers. The potential for development had never been fathomed because of its proximity to the boundaries of Federation space, but there was sufficient atmosphere and water to sustain a small population for an indefinite time.

Kodor was in his quarters when the objective of their journey became visual on the long range screens, and he promptly activated the sensitive geo-topographical scanners to give him the composition of the rock's stability. Life sustaining elements appeared to be abundant, and there were numerous cave-like impressions that could supply protection from the electrical storms that frequented the surface.

Kahlor buzzed the commander's security lock impatiently; their check-in signal had been deflected and he was chafing at the delay. Kodor admitted him and motioned him to a seat, ignoring the Klingon's peevish vexation.

"Have you contacted the guerilla base, Kahlor?"

"We are still on the opposite side of the planet, Kodor -- our instruments will not penetrate solid rock!" he fidgeted restlessly, barely submissive.

"You will keep trying, of course?" The Vulcan's eyebrows lifted in calm astonishment, his serenity imposing subconscious chagrin in the other's agitation.

"Kotaan is supervising the continuous transmission at this moment, Commander."

Kodor nodded complacently, studying his second-in-command absently.

"You stated that the chief guerilla is named Klyntee?"

"Yes, sir. We are to contact him to establish a tie between this outpost and the underground on Khaz, and to deliver the planet cloaking device. Also, we are to supervise installation of the invisibility screen and render any other assistance as needed."

Kodor nodded pensively, steeping his fingers in meditative speculation.

"There is a password, of course?" he persisted soothingly. The ship would orbit X-410 until a coded signal had been confirmed to establish beam down coordinates, and in the meantime he must keep his senior officers productively preoccupied. Kotaan was already monitoring incoming communications; Kahlor would have to be given a more intricate duty -- perhaps supervising transporter inspection would keep him busy.

Contact with the surface had been established by the third orbit; ID coded cleared to everyone's satisfaction and Kodor ordered a select landing party to assemble in the transporter room. A cover entry had already been logged into the computer as a specially decreed investigation of suspected pirate activities, and the helmsman had been instructed to contact them if any other ships approached the area. Without further hesitation, dressed in rough working uniforms, three officers and four technicians took their places on the transporter platform and dissolved into molecular effervescence.

The guerilla camp was as rustic as they'd expected. Mutant scanners guarded the periphery of the place, their hybrid condensers a patchwork of

ingenuity and spare parts, their energy cells stacked haphazardly against the handmade towers of stone and torpedo casings. The small stronghold appeared well stocked with arms, some of which included, unmistakably, pilfered military supplies and short range weaponry that Kodor identified as having been long retired by the War Department.

The rebel leader, Klyntee, received them gravely, casting only a cursory glance towards the alien member of the landing party. Kodor remained unobtrusive throughout the formal greetings and an initial exchange of Empire news. The cloaking device went unmentioned, the first order of the day consisting of a guided inspection of the labyrinth of caves that led down into the central chambers of the rebel base. One large, high-ceilinged room housed several computers, complete with hovering technicians; adjoining it was a smaller enclosure, a large star map of the Klingon Empire dominating its circumference. Small, glowing pins clustered thinly around the home planet of Khaz and Kodor guessed that they represented the Klingon fleet. Kahlor and Kootaan were visibly impressed.

Klyntee gestured proudly at the holographic images dancing in the center of the room.

"The computers feed data to the projector, enabling us to observe every military operation as soon as it happens; our informants on Khaz are very efficient." He paused to chew one lip thoughtfully. "The only information we lack is an exact agenda of the flagship, Aerrex. Our very clever Supreme Warrior follows no one else's orders, he is unpredictable, and he keeps to no established schedule -- he comes and goes with the solar winds!" Klyntee broke off angrily to stalk away from them towards a signalling technician wearing the insignia of a lieutenant. The two Klingons conferred heatedly for several moments, their guests forgotten in the interests of solving an immediate problem. The rebel leader threw up his hands finally, ending the conference, and strode grimly back to his guests.

"I ask pardon for the interruption, gentlemen. Shall we continue?"

The rest of the tour consisted of visiting living quarters of the several hundred or so insurgents housed on the planetoid. Dining facilities were primitive, most of the people preferring the open-aired campfires on the surface, and hospital accommodations were almost nonexistent. Klyntee shrugged philosophically.

"There will be casualties in this war, comrades; only the strong will survive, and those will live to fight again. We have what is necessary for childbirth assistance and the minor ailments of the very young; the rest of us take care of ourselves."

They returned eventually to the main chamber, once again to listen politely to Klyntee's boasts of the rebels' power and influence within the Klingon Empire. Kahlor, tiring of the older leader's verbal lectures, finally brought up the subject of the cloaking device. The rebel chieftain switched gears abruptly, his face widening into an effusive grin. And the group headed back towards the surface camp, the Vulcan leisurely under the watchful eyes of a rear guard.

No element has been left to speculation; their sources are well informed. Kodor had studied the display of weaponry and manpower objectively, taking in the special emphasis on Emptor's deployment. Several smaller ships had been commandeered for use as troop transports and weapons carriers, but only Emptor headed the list of effective warships. He could begin to understand why the trip to the rebel headquarters had been so important -- Emptor represented an invaluable plus to the resistance. And with good reason, he concurred -- she headed a pathetic list of limited assault forces



available.

Klyntee had pointedly ignored Kodor, focusing his attention towards the two younger Klingon officers. When Kahlor had moved to introduce his superior, Kodor had silenced him with a frown, hoping to use his anonymity to study the rebel situation and evaluate the camp's contribution to the revolution. He'd hoped Klyntee would believe the Vulcan to be a Romulan political prisoner, transported to the camp for formal execution; and the subterfuge seemed to have worked -- Kodor had been allowed to accompany the others on the tour of the pirate base with no more than a complimentary team of guards.

By the time they'd returned to the surface, the anemic sun was sinking behind a distant range of mountains. Kodor had just begun to wonder if the others had forgotten his presence when Klyntee brought up the subject himself, glancing at Kodor sharply.

"We have heard rumors of Romulan expatriates, but why did you bring him here -- for execution?"

There was silence as Kahlor hesitated, obtaining a nod of permission from his commander only after the rebel leader scowled menacingly at the alien.

"He is not Romulan, he is Vulcan -- the resemblance is often startling, it is said," Kahlor began nervously. "And we did not bring him here for execution, we could have done that much on the Emptor."

"A Vulcan! I have heard mention..." Klyntee turned to stare at Kahlor, suspicion narrowing his gaze. "You have brought him here for a reason. Was it, perhaps, to spy on our secret base -- have you turned your back on the revolution? Speak up, Lieutenant!"

Kahlor licked his lips nervously. The guerrilla chief had the reputation of destroying anyone who opposed him, including friends, and the younger Klingon involuntarily took a step backward. Two guards moved silently to flank Kodor, and Kootaan's face turned a sickly gray.

"His name is Kodor, and we have brought him here because he commands the Emptor."

"He commands? I thought you, Kahlor, were the commander of the Emptor? There was no mistaking the ominous tone in the older Klingon's question, and Kahlor took a deep breath as he glanced apprehensively at Kodor.

"I was to command only if we could not persuade Kodor to join with us. He carries a special immunity, an advantage that we can use against the tyranny of the Supreme Warrior. He is brother to Kalauq!"

The verbal bomb had the predicted effect: Klyntee whirled to face Kodor defiantly, two more security guards materializing at the guerrilla leader's side.

"Kalauq! The devil himself! How could you have joined forces with this Kinsman -- "

"We are with you, Klyntee!" Kahlor exploded.

The rebel leader turned back to the two young officers who had moved to stand shoulder to shoulder, their hands resting lightly on their weapons. He stared at them, slack-jawed, confusion draining the blood from his face. The guards had surrounded Kodor, their antique stunners drawn instinctively.

Kodor broke the spell, shrugging off the restraining hands of the security men. "Klyntee! I offer you greetings from the growing rebel forces of Khaz. We have much to discuss concerning Emptor's mission to capture the Supreme Warrior."

Klyntee glared at the other, unconvinced, his eyes never leaving those of his uninvited guest. Kootaan stepped forward to stand next to his alien commander, a cold smile emphasizing his confidence.

"It is true, Klyntee; Kodor seeks to destroy Kalauq for reasons of his own. We could ask for no better ally than Kodor, the Vulcan."

The words seemed to have a quieting effect on the rebel chieftain, and he motioned the guards into retreat. "He wants to destroy his own brother? I do not understand."

Kodor shook his head. "The details are unnecessary for the moment, Chief Klyntee; we have come here to install a cloaking device -- not to engage you in heated argument. The revolution will be successful only if Kalauq is brought to his knees quickly, and we are wasting precious time with accusations and threats."

The guards had re-formed behind their rebel leader, their faces registering disbelief. But Klyntee nodded stiffly, his eyes studying the other cautiously.

"You have demonstrated your bravery by coming down here without armed guards. What do you offer as proof of your wild story?"

"We have as much proof of who we are as you do that you are not pirates." Kodor's enigmatic answer elicited only an impatient grunt from the Klingon, and the Vulcan tried again to turn the conversation back to the revolution. "Suspicion does not foster friendship, sir. As proof of our sincerity with the movement, we will signal now for beam-down of the cloaking device, and afterwards we will discuss the exchange involving arms for the rebels on Khaz."

Kodor's quiet assumption of authority was not lost on the others, and as the mysterious box from Kahlor's cabin materialized a short distance from the men, Klyntee turned his back on the rest to examine the contents. Technicians stepped forward from their watchful positions and began stripping away the covering, their eager murmurs of confirmation drifting back to the waiting officers.

After a moment, Klyntee returned to face his guests, a slow smile twisting the corners of his mouth. "It is, indeed, the device as promised. And after it is installed permanently, I will see to it that you leave for Khaz with a ship's hold full of arms. We have weapons of many types, from all parts of the galaxy." He smiled again, slyly. "As pirates, we have access to countless sources; as rebels, we have much sympathy from friends." He tipped his head back to look up at the taller Vulcan, tugging at one earlobe decisively.

"We have a long night ahead of us. Come." Turning quickly, he led the small group across the main clearing to a blazing campfire where a pungent scent rose enticingly from a large black pot swinging above the flames. "You must join us for Choalta! it is the nourishment of courage, and contains the strength-giving nutrients that will sustain us until morning." He paused to regard the others gravely. "We share only with friends."

And the official invitation was gratefully accepted.

The business of spreading the revolution accompanied the long, sociable sharing of the tasty vegetable stew. Many glasses of smuggled Arean wine later, a schedule for installation of the cloaking device had been worked out, along with the transfer to the ship of disguised crates of stun guns and laser cannonry. A benevolent camaraderie punctuated the conversation, most of which involved the definite benefits of invisibility.

The cloaking device would complete the security of the remote planetoid, its already established cover as a pirate sanctuary a bonus in concealing the rebels' activities. Renegade ships would still be welcome in the stronghold, and Klyntee intended to press them into use as neutral vendors of truth to other worlds in the galaxy. If he could spread the word of Kalauq's real

intentions -- that of subjugation of all planets within reach -- informed resistance would make it more difficult. Soon the Supreme Warrior would find that his reputation had preceded him in most instances, the forewarned already wise to his cunning half-truths.

Klyntee had been hesitant to unveil long range goals of the revolution, even after having openly recognized the loyalty of the Emptor's officers. But as the evening lengthened, Kodor's straightforward suggestions as to reinforcing rebel defenses and establishing better confidential communications with resistance forces on Khaz finally convinced the rebel leader of the Vulcan's complete dedication to the cause. The next day, during a break taken from the concentrated labor to mount and arm the massive cloaking device, Klyntee followed Kodor a short distance away from camp to satisfy a nagging curiosity.

Kodor acknowledged the other's presence with an absent nod, and the two fell into step together, each absorbed in his own thoughts. Klyntee finally voiced his.

"If you are a brother to the Supreme Warrior, why do you seek his destruction?"

Kodor eyed the suspicious Klingon placidly. However, there was no indication of malice on the part of the other, merely unreserved interest.

"I have my reasons, Klyntee. That should be sufficient to all skeptics." He turned to resume his pace but the undaunted Klyntee pressed further, hurrying to catch the stride of the taller alien.

"How did you come to be the brother of a Klingon? I know of no dealings with the Vulcan race -- I cannot recall of ever having seen a Vulcan trader in my lifetime."

"My relationship with Kalauq is as yet not fully understood. There is the matter of my amnesia...." And haltingly Kodor related the cognizant facts to the revolutionary leader.

Klyntee listened courteously to the account, his eyes darkening with understanding.

"Your reasoning seems valid, Kodor. I suspect that Kalauq has not told you the whole truth." He answered Kodor's inquisitive look with a smile.

"Kalauq is an important member of the warrior faction of our race. He lives with intrigue, treachery, and deceit constantly -- it is his way of life. I can see that you have managed to resist his indoctrination for the most part although your alien blood probably had something to do with it, too."

Kodor nodded absently. "I believe that it is not my nature to think in terms of war as it is Kalauq's. And I also suspect he has not been completely honest with me although I am at a loss as to how I became involved with him to begin with."

Klyntee shook his head grimly. "Perhaps you will find out when our crusade concludes. Despite your training and association with the military forces of the Empire, you must now understand the other side of the question. No doubt Kahlor and Kootaan have not told you all there is to know about the revolution; they are still too young to guess at the intensity of feeling involved.

"We rebels oppose Kalauq and his puppets on the Council because we have grown tired of war, the expense as well as the discomfort. Our race became warriors many centuries ago when this part of the galaxy was still in its early stage of development. We fought then because we had to in order to survive. Be that as it may, certain of our people continued our violent tradition with the excuse that our heritage demanded it. It has only been



in recent generations that some of us began to realize the fallacy of that belief. We wanted to change; we wanted to teach our children the values of peace and friendship. But tradition is hard to overcome, and the first citizens who spoke out against our belligerent leaders were executed for treason. It took a long time before anyone was brave enough to try again!"

They had circled the encampment during the exchange, and returned almost unnoticed to the bustle of the guarded clearing. Kodor had acquired a surprisingly positive impression of the vigorous rebel leader, and the Klingon appeared to be at ease for the first time since his guests had arrived. However, the Vulcan was quick to realize that it would be extremely dangerous to cross Klyntee.

With mutual enthusiasm, they resumed their work on the intricate components of the cloaking device. It was evening of the second day when Kodor made the final connection, the last switch plate glowing with energy, and a rousing cheer erupted from the technicians. Klyntee motioned for silence, his eyes finding satisfaction in the Vulcan's as both stepped back to inspect the device from a respectable distance. Klyntee turned to the gathering crowd, grinning happily as he greeted each of them. "It is done!"

He motioned for silence finally and walked to the center of the clearing. "Honored guests, fellow comrades: we have all worked hard to achieve this moment. Now it is time to celebrate." He squinted at the horizon where a dying sun dipped even lower as he spoke. "Build up the fires, bring up the music makers, tonight we dance! Open a cask of wine, bring glasses, we must rejoice with our friends. Tomorrow will be time enough for sleep; tonight we make merry -- it may be some time before we can celebrate freely again!"

The encounter with the guerillas had been a triumph in itself, and on cue, the Emptor left orbit around the planetoid smoothly, her storage bays filled to capacity with arms. The loading had been tricky, diversionary drills keeping most of the crew busy as Kodor and his men beamed up the contraband. Special seals and labels ensured the mock innocence of the extra cargo, subsequent drydock recharging -- destiny of the contents, obscure depots in the interior which would absorb the supplies without suspicion.

Pirate goods were confiscated frequently by Klingon warships, and distribution became a matter for individual captains. Kodor's booty would be given no more than a routine yawn or a confidential wink by officials accustomed to the glib explanations in such cases. But the immediate problem was to return to Khaz without drawing attention to the fact that they'd made an unscheduled jaunt; and thin-lipped, Kodor ordered an aberrant course homeward.

Several hours had passed while Kahlor and Kotoan automatically secured silent running, ordered the drill teams back to normal procedures and reported to Kodor's quarters as ordered. The three officers slumped wearily onto the hard chairs of Kodor's lounge, sipping generous portions of Arcturian brandy that swirled colorfully in the large fragile glasses of Rigelian crystal. The scene was a quiet postscript to the boisterous party they'd left behind at the pirate base.

Kahlor leaned back and gazed contentedly at his commander. "You conducted yourself admirably, Kodor -- the guerillas accepted you completely!" He sighed happily. "It is official now; you are one of us." The Klingon raised his glass in salute to his alien friend. "To freedom from tyranny and

the end of Kalaūq."

The others drank deeply to the toast, the tart, stimulating liquor quieting the after-effects of stealth and surreptitious return to the ship to avoid curiosity among the less informed crew members. The wall viewer gaped back at them silently, the movement of stars and asteroids belying the speed at which they slipped through Klingon space. Their circuitous route back to Khaz was deliberate; no trace of their illicit journey must point to the rendezvous at the edge of the empire. The ship had become a fugitive and would maintain constant precautions in the event of discovery by Kalaūq's operatives.

Suspects were watched circumspectly, Kahlor's specially coached men having been sworn to secrecy on the penalty of death before delegation to the covert vigilance.

The glasses were empty and Kodor refilled them absently, spilling some of the potent liquid over the edge of his own goblet as he leaned momentarily on the edge of his desk, a fixed smile barely lifting the corners of his mouth. He raised the glass toward his two executive officers, the light in his eyes accenting the dark circles beneath them.

"To the new Klingon Empire, gentlemen!"

The brandy disappeared quickly, the three friends conferring eagerly over the immediate future of their venture. The successful installation of the cloaking device had been due largely to Kodor's expertise, and Kahlor studied him with a new respect, at the same time noting the deep lines in the Vulcan's face and the weary droop of his shoulders. The painstakingly intricate task had involved hours of computation, with assistance from only a handful of unskilled technicians. But Kodor had pre-set the control programming in less than half the usual time. And afterwards he'd joined the others briefly in the uninhibited dancing and toasting around the guerilla campfires for several hours before returning to the ship.

Kahlor stirred restlessly, returning to the sound of Kotoan's proud summation.

"The ship's engines have been re-energized, and we have enough fire power to take on half the ships in the galaxy. Kalaūq's course has been plotted just two parsecs away. It will not be long now, Kodor, that you will have the chance to broach the beast in his den! Once we have him prisoner the rest will be easy. The Council will yield when we have their Supreme Warrior as hostage, and the remainder of the fleet will flounder when it becomes leaderless. Kalaūq's legions are unhappy and skeptical, his promises of glory have failed to materialize and too much time has elapsed for him to make excuses much longer."

"We have to catch him first, Sub-Commander. And we must not underestimate our prey -- some of his operatives are very powerful in their own right." Kodor's words were not lost on the other two. Kotoan nodded grimly and held his glass out for more brandy.

"We must take care, Commander, not to tip our hand too soon. I have screened all of the communications personnel on board and have standing orders to be contacted immediately if the Aerrex appears within hailing distance. There are guards posted outside the main transmitter room and no one will be allowed to send or receive any dispatches without my permission."

Kodor's left eyebrow rose respectfully. "Very good, Kotoan. I trust that all monitors have been disconnected also?"

"Yes, sir -- or channeled through my consoles on the bridge and in my quarters. No communication will leave or enter this ship unless I am fully aware of same."

The commander of the Emptor rose to stretch his limbs wearily, circling

the room to ease the stiffness in his back. He paused thoughtfully to stare at his trembling hands, then turned abruptly to pour the remainder of the brandy into the two Klingon's glasses.

"You said the leader, Klyntee, could be trusted absolutely. What are his plans for us, Kahlor; do you know?"

"When the time comes Commander, we are to return to Khaz and confront the Council of the Elders. Our orders are to hold them in isolation until Klyntee's raiders have gained control of the military centers on Khaz and the Defense Depots. According to the plan, we will announce Klyntee as the new Supreme Warrior, and the Elders will then answer to his desires for new leaders. There are many qualified Klingons in the movement who will lead the people to a better future. Klyntee will impose martial law temporarily until the citizens have been informed of the purpose of the coup, but there will soon follow a freedom such as our race has never seen! The new government will be open and honest, and the people will have a direct say in governing their affairs. No one will be denied voice."

In the communion of silence that followed, Kodor seemed to draw away from the other two into his own thoughts. The rebellion had become fact and each of them pondered his own terms privately. The Klingons were bound to the promise of a free society; the Vulcan was driven by his obsession for the truth. Their pledge, however, was mutual.

The bottle had been emptied and Kahlor yawned wearily as he stood to leave.

"It is time for you to get some rest, Commander. The past few days have been especially tiring. Tomorrow I will take a double shift so that you can remain in your quarters to plan our next move against Kalauq." He smiled weakly and motioned Kootaan towards the door. Then in a sudden gesture of comradeship, he clasped his leader firmly on the shoulder.

"Try to get some sleep, my friend; there is much to accomplish in the days to come and you must be strong. Fortify yourself with sufficient energy for the coming battle."

Kodor bowed his head benignly and nodded. "I will...rest, Kahlor, thank you." He stood slowly, his hands gripping the desk so tightly that the knuckles became white knobs etched with green. Dismissal was a mere nod, and the two Klingons backed out obediently.

Kahlor turned out the light and sank back onto his hard pillow with a sigh.

"He grows worse -- have you noticed the shaking of his hands and the glazed eyes?"

"He is only tired, Kahlor. The strain of meeting Klyntee and the others was distressing to him also. And he has been without sleep for over a week supervising the estimation of Kalauq's course."

Kahlor snorted softly at his companion's easy explanation.

"It has been said that Vulcans can continue for uncounted time before becoming space weary. We have not been away from civilization that long. Even his appetite grows sparse and his frame grows thinner by the day."

"Nevertheless, it is nothing to worry about, I'm sure. Give it some time, Sub-Commander. He needs rest, that's all."

It had been a week since the ship left the guerilla garrison and the two Klingon officers met again in a far corner of the officer's dining room. Their expressionless faces and inaudible words did not reveal the seriousness



of their meeting although the food plates were curiously ignored throughout most of the conversation.

"There has been no improvement, Kotoan, despite many hours of rest. He has become visibly agitated by the day, and some crewmen have reported seeing him pacing the corridors during the night. We must take action before he collapses and is unable to command the ship!"

"It may be only a passing fever that will disappear in a few more days." Kotoan bit his lip nervously, unable to venture a more believable diagnosis.

"We cannot let it continue much longer, comrade! It will soon be of concern to other members of the crew. This morning he stumbled and would have fallen on the bridge if I had not been there to catch him. And he refuses to visit the dispensary --."

"We cannot follow him all over the ship, Kahlor; it would be too obvious. He is determined to avenge himself against Kalauq, and we are tracking the madman across the galaxy at top speed. It would be improper to interfere with his routine."

"If we do not do something soon it will be too late! Yesterday I had to repeat a question twice before he responded. In an emergency --."

"Yes, yes!" Kotoan gulped down most of his chaterri juice and poked absently at the vegetables on his plate. "I have an idea, Kahlor, one that I have been contemplating for several days. It might be unwise to suggest it --."

"Go on, any ideas you have might be helpful. Kodor must be snapped out of his strange condition before he confronts Kalauq or all will be lost!"

"It may also get us into a lot of trouble --."

"That has never stopped you in the past, Kotoan," Kahlor grinned knowingly. "Proceed."

"There is a small trading post within three days of our present course. Only a slight deviation would be required to stop there, but I believe it may contain a solution to Kodor's problem." He shook his head doubtfully at the other officer. "You know he never takes leave with the rest of us; convincing him to take advantage of our remedy may be difficult...."

Moments later the two left the dining room with set faces -- their destination, the commander's quarters.

Kahlor restored his uniform tunic carefully to the shared closet, selecting a soft, purple, belted shirt which would conceal his small cache of intergalactic currency within its folds. "Kotoan, you are wise beyond your years, I must admit. And I declare further that you will have my eternal, undying admiration. Most of the crew are already enjoying the benefits of an unexpected shore leave, and you and I will soon accompany our esteemed leader down to the surface to join them. The way you proposed this little jaunt to the commander was truly ingenious. I'm just sorry that I didn't think of it myself!"

"I was not too surprised at his assent, Kahlor -- in his present condition he would have agreed to anything! And our official explanation as to why Kodor has not been visible around the ship for the past three days seems to have been accepted unconditionally by the crew."

He touched his sparse beard with a small comb and adjusted the shiny gray tunic slightly before stepping into the corridor after Kahlor.

"Now, if we can just get him to the transporter without being seen!" And glancing furtively over their shoulders, they hurried down the hall towards Kodor's quarters.

# CHAPTER 7

## THEKUR IV

The street where they materialized on Thekur IV was dimly lit and only barely populated with pedestrians. A blinking signpost a few doors away drew Kahlor's attention, and he motioned the others to follow. The interior of the place was bright with glowing green lamps, the tables outlined in the eerie gloom to reveal several couples quietly engrossed in conversation.

With many empty tables to choose from, the two Klingons led their commanding officer to a spot away from the door, and signalling to the dark-haired barmaid, Kahlor ordered a bottle of Denarian quealiun, a Klingon favorite consisting of a highly volatile form of alcohol that was guaranteed to render most other humanoid species insensitive after the first few sips.

Kotaan blanched perceptibly as the slender bottle arrived with three tiny silvered glasses, and he tasted his first ration warily. Kahlor frowned at him meaningfully, covering the younger officer's grimace with blatant heartiness.

"An interesting place, don't you agree, Commander? I am told there is good entertainment later on. Shall we order dinner now?"

Kodor nodded distractedly, scanning their surroundings curiously and ignoring his drink. Kahlor clapped his hands authoritatively and a slim waiter took their order for a light meal. Kodor sipped his quealiun absently, and when the food arrived, half-heartedly picked at his portion. The other two downed everything in sight with great relish.

The inn was filling with guests and Kahlor motioned Kotaan to drink up, Kodor following suit reluctantly. The quealiun was powerfully effective as evidenced by patrons at several nearby tables with the same uniquely shaped bottles before them, but Kodor continued to down the liquid fire with no apparent ill effects. The second bottle arrived and Kahlor proposed a toast, urging Kodor to empty his glass in several suggestive motions. Kotaan had slipped away furtively when a black spotlight burst over the center of the room and a half-naked dancer rose from a revolving pedestal spiraling up through the floor. Soft music accompanied her final dishabille and silence fell over the room, all eyes watching the ritual with breathless fascination. No one noticed Kotaan return to his seat with another bottle of quealiun and he nodded imperceptibly at Kahlor as he generously filled all three glasses. In the early stages of intoxication, Kodor stared curiously at





the dancer moving smoothly around the perimeter of the circle, the contortions of her sleek body eliciting gratified murmurs from the surrounding customers. Quealiun flowed like water, and the crowd moved soporifically with the girl's supple motions.

The music died and conversation resumed around the room during the brief interim. Kotaan examined his commander's full glass reprovingly.

"It is time to celebrate our successful mission, Exalted One," he intoned with great exaggeration. "Drink up, Commander!"

Kodor frowned quizzically at the other's conspiratorial grin and Kahlor lifted his glass impetuously.

"Drink up, Kodor; tomorrow we may die! Tonight," he shrugged happily, "we live, with good food and drink, and captivating entertainment." He clinked glasses with Kotaan's and demonstrating his boldness, tipped his head to down the fiery contents in one gulp.

Kodor hesitated, his pride gathering force as he followed suit. And his eyes closed involuntarily as he suppressed the suffocating explosion that burned a path to his brain.

The music began again, a soft, slithering wail that silenced the restless crowd into whispering respect, and Kodor narrowed his eyes to gaze weakly at the returning dancer.

She was a soft green in the black light, obviously of Orion extraction, and she moved slowly across the floor, her arms and legs gleaming smoothly in the narcotizing light. The bottle had been emptied again, Kodor's glass brimming anew after each sip, his attention riveted on the dancer's progress towards their table. The spotlight followed her dutifully, her body writhing sensually around their table in time to the music's hypnotic strains.

"Dance for my friends!" bellowed Kahlor, rising to lift her to the table's surface. She turned seductively on the small slab to crouch down over Kodor and peer at him curiously. She lifted his glass to sip its contents, then held it to his lips until he had drained the rest. Slipping to the floor again, she circled the table, pausing suggestively to lean against him, the heavy musk of her perfume blanketing his senses disconcertingly.

Kahlor and Kotaan leaned back in their chairs wonderingly, smiling in amazement at their stuporous, renegade commander.

"I think she likes you, Kodor," Kahlor observed liberally.

Kodor sat woodenly erect at the table, his eyes glassy mirrors of flame. And as the pheromones of the Orion dancer enveloped him, he shuddered, his intellect closing defensively against her stimulating essence. In his half-maddened state he was still able to sort out impressions, his mind wallowing in a foggy resistance to his body's obsession.

Vulcan hands shook as they groped frantically for the glass that sat before him, and Kahlor swooped just as frantically to refill it. The commander of the Emptor raised the brimming glass to his mouth to inhale the tawny liquid painfully, his throat burning with the cold fire of passage. But the agony couldn't displace the room's pulsating sounds and smells. And her enticing fragrance floated around him with suffocating desire as Kodor's stomach tightened rebelliously.

It was a mistake to come here. I don't know why but...I shouldn't have...agreed to the excursion. Something terrible is happening...must get away...must return to the ship...Safe there...

He took another sip of the silky liquid, his eyes glowing eerily with the embers that flamed violently in his depths. The girl whirled around their table with lithesome grace, reaching out to fondle Kodor lightly and ruffle his hair. He stiffened almost fearfully, the unexplained need racing through raw nerve endings to feed the developing blaze that would soon become

inextinguishable.

When he mouthed something weakly, his companions, amazed that he was still able to reason, bent closely to hear his words.

"We must...leave here...I must return...to the ship..."

As though he hadn't understood, Kootaan broke in abruptly to raise his glass. "This is excellent quealium, Kahlor! I don't remember ever having tasted better, don't you agree?"

Kahlor agreed heartily in spite of his own fading grasp on reality, and heroically continued the charade.

"A toast to our next mission and its speedy conclusion!" The two Klingons clinked glasses and motioned to the trembling Vulcan to do the same.

As Kodor lifted the half-empty glass, he felt a wave of nausea, and extreme dizziness blurred his perception. He turned his head to peer at Kahlor suspiciously, but the other nodded fuzzily and smiled.

"Drink it down, sir, it will relax you and help you to sleep."

"Logical..." Kodor labored intently, and slowly complied. But the glass slipped from his fingers as the noise of the inn overpowered him, its murky atmosphere closing down and pushing him softly into darkness.

They half-carried, half-dragged him up the dim stairway to the girl's room. She motioned them towards the bed where they dropped him gently onto soft pillows, and hastily retreated towards the hallway. Glancing back at the green dancer, they heard her call softly as she bent over the limp body of the Vulcan.

"Come back after dawn, he will be recovered by then." And she nodded encouragingly at them as they slipped out quietly, carefully shutting the heavy door behind them.

Quickly she began removing Kodor's clothing while he slept, insensible to her intentions. She gently explored the muscles of his shoulder, pricking it expertly with a vial of healing stimulant. Shortly, his eyes fluttered rapidly to open wide and stare around the room.

"Where am I, what am I doing here!" He gasped the words in alarm, noting finally the absence of his clothing and the smoothness of the cover against his bare skin. Her subtle scent nearby revived him further, and she moved instinctively to pull him towards her, rubbing the cool flesh of her green thighs across his inflamed lower limbs.

"Relax, strong one, and let the drug do its healing," she whispered softly, caressing parts of him that had never been caressed before. His body went rigid, his eyes darting wildly around in shocked realization. She nibbled gently on his shoulder.

"Just lean back and let me do what I must; we will travel together tonight. Do not turn away! Soon the Pon Farr will be abated...."

Her strange words made no impression on his frantic efforts to flee. But she was stronger than he'd suspected, and she pinned him quite effectively to the bed, her body sprawled strategically across his.

"No! I must return to my ship -- I cannot -- don't -- " he pleaded uselessly, his body strangely indifferent to his frenzied pleas. But her hands forced his mouth to hers, soft lips compelling his silence at last. One final, feeble attempt to push her away resulted only in her pressing closer to him, her back rippling sensually under his hands.

"Yes, you must! I recognized your problem immediately! Those fool Klingons didn't know what was wrong with you, but I did. Relax, it is necessary that I help you...be still...don't fight it...."

She held him tightly until he grew quiet in her arms, his struggles less frantic, his skin hotly moist from the battle he was losing. And with a soft groan he submitted to her invitation.

The mountain shimmered and billowed in the distance, just beyond the crest of the ridge. His breath was becoming ragged now with the difficulty of the climb. And the angle was more pronounced as he moved up into the thinning atmosphere. The sun burned high overhead, its blaze delineating a barren landscape highlighted by drifts of red sand and cuts of black rock. A furnace-like breeze sent beads of sweat running down his neck and back as he paused to note a second fiery orb lifting above the horizon.

Two suns?

The air seemed suddenly thick and suffocating, and there was a heavy warmth low in his loins that he hadn't noticed before. He wanted to rest, and he looked around him for a large rock with a shady niche, a place in which to hide from the twin suns to relieve the pain of growing exhaustion. But something drove him on, nonstop, his feet moving involuntarily; and the mountain moved closer.

His legs were becoming numbed from exertion, the muscles cramping spasmodically as he pushed on, straining, lifting, shuddering with the need to reach the summit. He knew it was only a few more feet; but the heat from the suns was almost overwhelming, and his end seemed certain. Then he was stumbling over the edge, cartwheeling past the blur of sky and mountain, down...down...his cry silenced by the cold, crystalline depths of the crater lake....

He awoke with a shudder, and found the girl, Drayla, lying next to him on the bed, her breath fanning his shoulder in weary puffs. He felt the rapid beating of her heart against his side and inhaled the fragrance of her sweat on his chest. A chill swept over him, and realizing their nakedness, reached down to replace the tangled bed covers. In the encroaching daylight he could not help noting the glistening length of her supple form.

Struggling disconcertedly to sort out conflicting images of a quealundimmed evening, Kodor paused in awesome retrospection of uninhibited, sensual intimacy with the dancing girl. It could only have been a nightmare, he reasoned peevishly; such a thing could not have happened! But there had been another dream, of conquest, and of slaking need....

Memory of a needle prick surfaced, and he wondered, with slight relief, what exotic potion had been responsible for his hallucinations. He glanced at Drayla with new respect; she was a creature from another world, undoubtedly capable of providing many other mysteries as well.

Leaning back on the pillows and cradling his head in his arms, he indulged in a careful assessment of his condition. Despite a throbbing in his head if he changed position too quickly, the nervous agitation that had plagued him for weeks was completely gone! A relaxed complacency had supplanted the annoying drumbeat that had permeated his consciousness -- and had, apparently, become obvious to Kahlor and Kootaan as well, he mused wryly -- and he paused to examine himself with astonishment. He had never felt better!

Drayla stirred and yawned, and Kodor turned to look at her curiously.

"I believe you may well have saved my life last night," he observed quietly to the girl. "For some reason, a seriously debilitating malady, for which I had no cure myself, seems to have subsided. It can only be that you, in some way, are responsible for my recovery." His tone was matter-of-

fact, but the words were couched in faint curiosity.

Drayla rose deliberately on one elbow to smile at him in nodding assent. Kodor frowned.

"Who are you? And how did you know..." he stared at her anxiously, one eyebrow elevating slowly as apprehension grew. But her eyelids dropped sleepily over light green eyes and she flopped back on her pillow.

"Does it matter so much," she sighed wearily, turning affectionately to trace the muscles of his jaw with one finger. "Many ships pass our way with shore leave parties of all sorts. I have worked at the inn for a long time and have gained...certain knowledge." She smiled ruefully. "You are Vulcan so it was not hard to guess the reason for your 'difficulty'. When your young officer came to me for help he didn't know why you were suffering or what was happening to you. I suspected it was the cyclical condition from his description and agreed to help. One look at you was enough to confirm my suspicions and I knew you needed...."

He was very quiet, considering her explanation with a flush of embarrassment. She stretched idly, reaching out for him suggestively; then paused in consternation at his sudden reticence.

"By the gods...you didn't know!"

Kodor stirred warily and swung up to sit on the edge of the bed. Drayla was quiet for a moment, then pulled herself up beside him.

"No wonder you fought off my advances -- you didn't know that I was only trying to help, did you?"

He turned away stiffly and shook his head. "I was confused -- there had been too much liquor -- "

"My dear love, your problem was more serious than that!" She smiled at him, wondering idly who he was and why he hadn't known what was wrong. "You were in the death stages of Pon Farr."

When he didn't react she pressed further. "Hasn't anyone ever told you...."

"My brother is the Supreme Warrior of the Klingon Empire. He takes care of my needs and has assured me," he lied defensively, "that he would find a suitable female for me at the proper time. There has never been any mention of...." He faltered uncertainly as she shook her head at him in amusement.

"Your brother -- a Klingon? Klingons don't know anything about Pon Farr! He must be very ill-informed as to the needs of the mature Vulcan male...as a matter of fact, Pon Farr is one of the best kept secrets of the mature Vulcan male!" She chuckled softly at his disconcerted glare and took one of his hands firmly to reassure him. Then with straightforward terms, she instructed him in the legacy of the Vulcan seven-year reproductive cycle, and the consequences of ignoring it.

There was a long silence following her disclosure, and Kodor closed his eyes in shame, unable to look at her. His pride, his very existence, had hinged on her wise intuition and the ability to remedy his fevered condition, a condition which he surmised was over and above the usual demands she encountered in her nightly assignations. With enlightened perspective he also wondered if she had been amused at his clumsiness.

"Do you regret one night of love, Kodor?" Troubled by his apparent confusion, she leaned against him timorously. "Would you have been better off suffering through it alone, tempting death by your own Vulcan blood fever? Your two friends cared enough about you to seek help." She sighed regretfully as his shoulder stiffened against her intimacy.

"You don't owe me anything; I've been paid for my services.... But you owe them your life -- in their own blundering manner your Klingon



friends prevented your death! They were lucky to find someone like me who was aware of your problem."

He pulled away from her to wrap one of the bed coverings around him securely, unable to refute her reasoning. For an instant the memory of an oddly familiar, smiling face tugged at his injured self-esteem, and he sensed that once, long ago, there had been someone else who had cared about him.

Holding the covering defensively, he moved quickly from the bed into the adjacent bathing niche, leaving her uncomfortable familiarity behind. She followed demurely with his clothes and retreated to straighten the bedroom. As he was pulling on his boots he heard tapping at the outer door and then familiar Klingon voices. Kahlor and Kootaan had returned to retrieve their salubrious commander.

In full possession of his dignity once more, he strode into the other room, fully dressed, where they stood waiting patiently just inside the door, not daring to look at him. He inspected them coolly as Drayla stepped forward with his cloak, her eyes carefully avoiding his.

"I wish you well on your journey, Kodor," she said formally, "and hope you find what you are seeking. If you should return this way again...."

"Thank you," he returned, not unkindly. "I do not believe we will be returning; our mission takes us in another direction."

Quite unexpectedly, strange words came to mind, the compulsion to say them to her overriding his cool reserve. "Live long and prosper, Drayla."

They stared at each other for one long breath until he broke the spell to move quickly through the door. The two Klingons bowed appreciatively at her before hurrying after him.

In the vacuum of his absence, Drayla sat quietly staring out the only window of her drab room. She had never felt an aftermath so keenly; this one had touched her deeply, beyond the surface pleasure of his desire.

It was usually routine with a Vulcan, but this one had been different -- she wasn't sure just how. Separation was, of course, inevitable. But she had kept from him her disappointment in the coldness of his leavetaking. Loneliness had become a way of life to her, and she suspected that he also endured a unique exile of his own, despite the good fortune of having two young companions to look after him.

She had not taken the usual precautions with this one -- there had hardly been time enough to convince him of his own need! His seed would survive in her body for several hours, and she secretly hoped there would be harvest from this coupling. He had been in the deepest fevers of the Pon Farr, at the height of his fertility.

But longing cannot replace chemistry.

By the next moonrise, Drayla had lost the spark of life that had been unable to endure its alien harbor.

The manifestation usually happened during his sleep. He would awaken in the darkened cubicle of his sleeping quarters, disconcerted, his senses reeling with the impact of the nightmare. The nameless faces that had haunted his dreams for months had reappeared, calling him by another name and triggering fleeting impressions of smiling hazel eyes that beckoned silently to him.

The face, crowned with dark, sandy hair, was disturbingly familiar,



and the mouth grinned a welcome that tugged deeply at his submerged emotions. As always, another face would join the first, the eyes a dark, piercing blue framed by darker brows that yielded to an even more familiar frown. But identification eluded his inert faculties and he'd flounder blindly through the troubling fragments, groping for the reason behind the recurring hallucinations.

In desperation he would sit up abruptly, thrusting the dreams into the deepest corners of his injured mind. Typically, the memories retreated behind a terrifying barrier in his restructured thoughts, evolving into a blanketing fog that swirled around him dangerously. Finally, his bearings lost, he'd react in angry frustration, the scars on his face and neck standing out in livid green, his twisted hand grasping in futility at the bed covers.

But the profane fissures in his recollection invariably prevailed, and he'd fall back on his pillow, exhausted, sleep returning eventually to bring dreamless oblivion. And upon awakening again, he would not recall anything more than a brief, puzzling interruption of slumber. The disquieting sensation of being lost would recede and he'd rise as usual to attend to his duties.

Nevertheless, the Pon Farr had created a more powerful suspicion that his life was not as it should be. The release from the compulsive mating drive -- which had reversed his physical deterioration completely -- had surreptitiously weakened the malignant deception of his brain. And later, when the visions came again in the solitude of his cabin, he'd plunged defiantly through the intimidating cloud that shrouded them. With one wrenching mental thrust he'd breached the curtain, shattering the barricades to his past even beyond the dark intersection of rebirth and infinity.

The pathway led through blood-red obscurity to terror; yet he found the dim threshold of understanding safely and paused apprehensively. In grave determination he slipped through shades of confusion and disorientation until the bewildering illusions were indisputably clear. Faintly hopeful, he'd permitted the rush of memory to overwhelm him. The comforting visages of his past were no longer nameless. Kirk, McCoy, Scott, Chapel... And, Enterprise! The beauty of the starship filled his being with long moments of awesome preoccupation.

His mind receding chronologically, he saw his home as a youngster, heard his mother's soft voice, felt the stern disapproval of his father's glance. The years flashed by as if streaming from a projector running wild as over and over one fact emerged: I am Spock, heir to the clan Xtmprsqzntwlf, uncrowned prince of the realm of Vulcan! The joy of revelation filled his being. I have found myself -- I know who I am!

Elation was short lived. He was back on the bridge of the Enterprise, stunned and shocked by the devastation of the surprise attack. Once more there was a half-conscious search for someone in the wreckage...Kirk! The frantic need to find the other swelled to alarm, then unaccustomed panic.... He could no longer feel the tenuous thread of communication that had existed between him and his human friend for many years, a thread of awareness that surfaced when the other had been in peril but still alive. Suddenly there had been nothing, even though he'd called out. There had been no response. Kirk...dead? His tortured memory struggled with the conclusion.

Suddenly a malevolent mist surrounded him coldly; the image of Kalauq grinned through a haze of remembered agony. Once more Spock relived the endless weeks of resistance to the mind-tearing machinery, and the nights of grief over a dying starship. He reviewed the interminable anguish at the loss of friends and the helplessness of isolation...until the final insensibility of electronic amnesia had engulfed his substance. Dreadful awareness of



other horrible, soul-twisting abuse returned to drench him with sweat, and the ultimate violation brought him out of his reminiscence with a hoarse cry of abhorrence.

The lab, that hideous, coldly depraved prison where he'd experienced the mental and physical rape of his being, materialized with appalling precision. Spock shuddered, instinctively drawing his defenses around himself in fetal attitude as he sobbed uncontrollably, his body writhing in shame and degradation. The catharsis drained him of emotion; and as the reverberations of his humiliation subsided, he vowed to reclaim his dignity and cleanse his soul to begin again in the path of his heritage.

The temples of his gods were far away, across parsecs of space in hallowed areas girded with solace and generations of honor. It would be difficult to return to them to obtain the rejuvenation of his spirit, to meditate for the strength to do what he must...but he had to try. Only vengeance could heal the wounds he had endured; only vengeance could banish the hate from his mind and restore the tranquility he had once owned. The laboratory must also be destroyed, just as Kalauq -- the unclean beast who had brought him to the edge of Hell -- must be eradicated.

Spock's sanguineous intent had become full-blown, shouldering aside the tenets of non-violence that had become inherent to his race through centuries of peace. There could be no pacific solution to the dilemma in his new logic -- he realized that Kalauq was a threat not only to himself but to the Federation as well. Defeating the Klingon assassin at his own game would assuage the bitter pain of his disgrace as well as ensure the safety of the galaxy. He knew now that the extent of Kalauq's ambition was unalterably evil and all-inclusive, the greed for power having accelerated beyond control. And as the Supreme Warrior, all of the military power in the empire was his to command -- and had already been put into motion.

Kalauq's diplomatic mission to Rom had been shrewdly conceived; a Klingon-Romulan alliance would undoubtedly persuade other lesser kingdoms to join forces in an offensive that could topple the unsuspecting Federation before an allied retaliation fleet could be assembled. The insurrection Spock had enjoined had suddenly become critical, the abolition of Kalauq and his government imperative. The objectives of Kahlor and Kootaan were now indubitably his: a private vendetta against a virulent omnipotence; and the resolve to undermine and upset the criminal insanity that endangered the entire galaxy...

He'd feigned weariness the following day, ordering Kahlor to the bridge watch in his stead. His strategy would have to be infallible, and he paced his cabin for hours debating the loyalty of his two executive officers. Vulcan caution had returned forcefully and previous memories of Klingons had instituted a new wariness towards Kahlor and Kootaan. Now he reviewed his association with them in a new light, comparing their emotionalism to the cold logic necessary for his mission.

But he knew that he needed some assistance in his scheme, and the younger officers had been the only friends he'd had since his captivity. Furthermore, they had trusted him enough to include him in their dangerous plans against Kalauq. His return to the bridge was marked only by his newly assumed austerity. The ship sped on towards Khaz, shipboard routine returning to normal except for the cool constraint of its commander. Kahlor and Kootaan carried out his orders submissively, venturing neither opinions nor observations about his strangely subdued demeanor, and they retreated

to their own quarters each evening in puzzled dismay.

Although he'd exhibited no further reproof upon returning from Thekur IV, both of them attributed his tight-lipped reserve to that censurable escapade. Therefore, it was with some slight trepidation they obeyed the summons to his quarters on the sixth day away from the trading post, believing that it implied a severe rebuke for the insubordination.

The cabin was in semi-darkness, an ill omen in their uneasy frame of mind. Kodor was nowhere to be seen, but three glasses and a full decanter of brandy stood on the sideboard in a familiar repetition of the past. And exchanging glances of relief, the two Klingons came to respectful attention in the center of the lounge.

He entered quietly from his sleeping area, dismissing their salutes with a sharp nod and gesturing for them to be seated. Still without speaking he filled the glasses and passed them to the other two before taking his own seat near the communications console. Kahlor and Kotaan sipped their brandies nervously, hands trembling noticeably, eyes dutifully downcast. And their commander's quiet greeting caught them unprepared.

"Gentlemen, my name is Spock. I am from the planet Vulcan and am an officer in Starfleet of the United Federation of Planets. I can no longer pretend to be the Klingon commander you knew; Kodor no longer exists."

In the stunned silence that followed they looked at each other in astonishment.

Spock studied his brandy thoughtfully, waiting for one or the other to respond; but after a time, their mute paralysis prompted him to continue.

"My visit on Thekur IV not only resolved a life and death situation, it triggered the return of my memory."

Kahlor stared at him unbelieving, the clandestine beam-down to the trading post still vividly ominous to him. He and Kotaan had anticipated a severe reprimand, including open contempt for their reckless deception; this astounding confession was beyond their comprehension.

They sat rigidly, half-raised glasses forgotten as Spock summarized briefly the reason for his puzzling debilitation, making scant reference to Drayla's remedy. Kahlor couldn't help grinning appreciatively at the latter but was instantly sobered with an indignant Vulcan glare. Further explanation of Spock's history held the Klingon's attention at last, Kotaan's eager curiosity about the starship Enterprise easing the room's disquieted atmosphere. Kahlor seemed content to sit back and listen, assessing the unexpected turn of events calmly.

Even after extensive disclosure of his origins, Spock realized that Kahlor was troubled about something. Kotaan's inquisitiveness had been appeased finally, and silence gathered between them again. Kahlor moved then to refill the glasses and leaned forward with a worried frown.

"If you are who you say you are, why did Kalauq sponsor you, and what are his plans for you in the future?" Kahlor's pointed inference was not lost on the other two.

"I would assume that he has an ulterior motive in bringing me to this point, Kahlor." Spock's grim reply did little to resolve his own suspicions, however, and he nodded gravely at the others. "I believe that Kalauq intends to use me against the Federation, although I cannot state truthfully what manner he has chosen."

Kotaan shook his head slowly. "Whatever Kalauq intends to do, you can count on it being fatal. And if he discovers you've regained your



memory...!"

"I don't plan to inform him of my recovery, Kotaan," Spock interjected drily. "Unless, of course, the two of you find it necessary...." He glanced at them searchingly, one eyebrow lifting towards his hair.

"Whatever happens in the future, you are still Kodor, our Vulcan friend and commander," Kahlor echoed reassuringly. "But if you have changed your mind about joining us...?" He broke off as Spock shook his head emphatically and rose to pace the small area around his desk.

"I am fully committed to your cause, Kahlor, now more than ever. I have personal reasons for wanting to capture Kalauq -- alive, gentlemen. Before I can accomplish that end, however, there is something else I must do."

Confidently, he laid the whole story of his capture before them, pausing momentarily only to quiet his own emotional consternation as he related memories of the laboratory and the drugged aftermath. They'd offered no comforting conclusions as to the purpose of the research center, only that they'd heard frightening stories about the place. Most disconcerting of all, Spock was at a loss to explain the physical and mental manipulations that he'd suffered at the hands of the doctors and technicians.

"Attempts to acclimate me into Klingon society by tampering with my basic cultural perceptions must have been a climax to some other project since it was initially successful. I had accepted the fallacy that Kalauq was my kinsman. And I did assume the expressions and emotions of a Klingon. But I believe that I was only the fringe of the experiment. And in order to find out the main purpose of my ordeal, I must visit the laboratory once more."

They stared at him in horror, the suggestion of returning to the source of his nightmares beyond any intelligent reasoning. Even though he shared their dread, he offered a stoic rationale.

"If I am to know what my role is in Kalauq's plans, I must find out what happened in the laboratory. It has something to do with his conquest of the galaxy, I'm sure, and if I can disrupt the process it may give us some time to put our own plans into force. There is no alternative, Gentlemen; I must begin at the beginning in order to ascertain what the ending is to be."

When he was alone again he'd realized that the two young Klingons hadn't questioned his loyalty but had reaffirmed their allegiance to him unconditionally. Their trust warmed him with new confidence and he'd pledged silently to reward their support. Somehow, in the months to come, he'd ensure that his two Klingon friends would be given the deserving amity of the inhabitants of his own world.

Emptor achieved orbit without challenge only to learn a short while later that Kalauq had circumvented Khaz in favor of another diplomatic endeavor, this time to the Tholian Assembly. The ship slipped into transporter altitude and settled stealthily into drydock anchorage high over the planet. Apparently their absence had gone unnoticed.

Kahlor and Kotaan petitioned to transport down to the surface with him until Spock determined their only purpose was to deposit a precoded message in a secret cache, a retrieval point for underground runners. He elected to deliver the capsule himself, chiding them gently for their lack of faith in him. He further charged them with supervising the recharging of Emptor's energy cells and the beaming down of their precious cargo. There was no



further need to remind them that there were those aboard who might not be sympathetic to their cause. The two executive officers were forced to accept his logic, and hurriedly drew a crude map to aid him on the surface below.

Spock's descent to the planet would not go unobserved by Klingon sensors originating from the defense systems of the capital city. But the former Kodor commanded authority and respect throughout military ranks, and it was relatively easy to obtain permission for a land visit -- as well as an unscheduled testing of weaponry beyond the parameters of Khaz. Spock smiled to himself at the ease with which he was able to execute his intentions.

A late evening hour was selected for his excursion to avoid both civilian and military curiosity; at the proper time he called his subordinate officers to accompany him to the transporter. The technician was dismissed and Kootan positioned himself behind the controls as Spock took his place on the platform.

"Sub-commander Kahlor," Spock faced his first officer gravely, "you are in temporary command of the Emptor until I return. If I do not return..." he held up a hand to quiet the other's protest, "you will carry out our original plan and get word to Starfleet as to my fate as soon as you can. There are certain personnel who may be interested."

He nodded to Kootan and the process took him away as the two worried Klingons swallowed their fear and resignedly positioned themselves for a long wait. They had observed him in pain, silent rage, and enervating prostration. Now they felt closer to him than they'd ever felt before.



## CHAPTER 3

# THE CORONA

Kirk and McCoy stood on the upper level of Command Center overlooking the shuttle docks, San Francisco spread out before them in the hazy morning sunlight. Kirk sighed happily.

"It's good to be alive, Bones. Never thought I'd see it again -- this lovely old city. I had forgotten how beautiful the bay is, dotted with sails and old style fishing boats. Maybe we can catch a ride on one of the old schooners before...." He broke off distractedly, straightening his uniform with a tug and turning towards the moving stairs that would take them to the next office level.

"Are you sure you want to go through with this, Jim?" McCoy frowned nervously, fingering the packet of report tapes under his arm. "Nogura specifically stated that the Enterprise would not be back in shape for another six months, maybe longer. What will you do if he says no?"

"I'll ask him for another ship! The doctors pronounced me fit as a fiddle," Kirk insisted happily, "and I'm rarin' to go. Besides, I've wasted too much time already, sitting around hospitals and waiting rooms. It's time I got some work done." He stalked confidently along the hallway towards the Admiral's office, the scowling doctor following uneasily.

"I don't know why you need me along on this trip, Jim," McCoy fidgeted. "I'm a doctor, not a legal beagle. And from what I've heard about Nogura, in order to get anywhere near him you have to be the Son of God, Himself!"

Kirk chuckled at his chief medical officer's metaphor and motioned him to hurry.

"You're my illegal counsel today, Bones. You've got all my ammunition under your arm and I'm going to use it only if I have to. Nogura is going to give me a ship!"

McCoy grimaced sourly as Kirk pushed open the door to the fleet admiral's outer office and walked boldly into the lion's den.

The sun was high overhead as they rode the outer elevator to the ground.

"That wasn't so bad, was it, Bones? You came through admirably,"

Kirk punned soberly into his friend's glare. "We got a ship, didn't we? Now all we have to do is get the rest of the crew out of hock."

McCoy glanced heavenward and followed the other out into the glaring sunlight. If he knew his captain as well as he thought he knew him, they'd be pulling out in two weeks, maybe less. He shook his head mournfully. Kate had been right: once a starship captain, always a starship captain.

There had never been any resentment between the two officers in all the years they'd known each other. But Jim's farewell to Kate Porter would always bother McCoy's sense of chivalry.

When Kirk's improving sight had become increasingly evident to both of them, McCoy had reacted to the long awaited achievement with mixed feelings. On the one hand, he was overjoyed that his friend and former commander had returned to a semblance of his old self. And on the other, he dreaded informing Kate that Jim was no longer legally blind, and that he was expected to regain full vision in a few short months of out-patient treatment.

It was almost a relief to McCoy that the news had come as no surprise to the outspoken young woman. But he still smarted from the knowledge that, inadvertently, he had caused her grief by bringing his friends together in the first place.

He'd finally worked up his courage to call her himself and she'd invited him to supper.

"I suspected something was different between us several weeks ago," Kate confessed as she and McCoy walked the perimeter of her back yard. She went on to quietly explain that Kirk had been painfully reticent yet oversolicitous of her, and she'd sensed his growing concern. Their relationship had become comfortably close, she'd added softly, so that she was certain something was bothering him.

They'd paused near the rosebed and McCoy inhaled a fleeting fragrance wistfully before joining her on a nearby carved stone bench.

"He was very romantic," she continued. "Picked a rose and put it in my hair and told me how much he enjoyed being with me. He seemed upset -- yet happy -- and laughed a lot whenever I said something funny. He was almost playful --," she shook her head, remembering, and McCoy wondered if she could sense his own heavy heart; but she began to speak softly again and he listened sympathetically.

"Jim was quiet for a long time after that and I recall teasing him a little, accusing him of listening to the birds instead of whispering sweet nothings in my ear. That's when he asked me to marry him.

"At first I thought he was just making another joke. But when I didn't take him seriously he asked me again, and I knew it was no joke." She sighed and fingered the tiny pendant at her neck, a golden replica of the Enterprise that Kirk had ordered for her birthday. The setting sun caught the planes of its saucer and glinted colorfully at McCoy, and he was struck sorely by the irony of the symbolism.

"Instead of answering his proposal, I asked Jim if something was wrong. I was slightly thunderstruck, I'm afraid, when he told me he had his sight back." Kate sighed deeply and they sat in silence for several moments, McCoy at a loss for words to console her effectively.

After a while she rose silently and started back towards the house, McCoy falling into step sorrowfully, unable to offer anything but the moral support of his arm around her shoulder.

"It wasn't that I doubted his sincerity, Leonard," she demurred gently. "But I had never intended our relationship to go beyond friendship, and I

told him so. He seemed terribly hurt, then just a bit angry. I think he knew I was right but he didn't want to admit that it would make a difference in our attitudes at that point.

"I knew about the life he'd led before his premature retirement and I explained that I didn't expect him to give up that life to take care of a handicapped wife." She chuckled mirthlessly. "Once a starship captain...."

After the disastrous marriage proposal, Kirk cooled down and resumed an amiable rapport with Kate, even inviting her to spend a long weekend in the mountains with him. But his later decision to apply for return to active duty prompted McCoy's predictable response.

"What about Kate?"

"Kate already knows," came back the calm rejoinder.

McCoy erupted angrily. "Damn it, Jim, this is no two-bit floozie you're toying with; Kate Porter is one helluva gallant lady!"

Kirk had shaken his head in disbelief, clapping a hand on his friend's shoulder to quiet him.

"Bones...? You're in love with Kate yourself, aren't you...."

Nevertheless, McCoy agreed to accompany Kirk to the library the day before they were to leave where Kate had arranged to meet them in one of the small reading rooms. There was no one to intrude on their farewells and she had remained philosophical to the end, welcoming McCoy's presence with cheerful complacency.

They'd exchanged polite, inane banter as though by putting off the inevitable they could lessen the discomfort, and Kirk had been incredibly shy, stammering to a halt when they'd run out of pointless conversation. Much later McCoy would marvel at how Kate had taken command of the situation.

"I love you, Jim Kirk," she'd admitted sadly, reaching across the table for his hand. "But the stars are your life and I can't compete with them -- I doubt that any woman could." Her tremulous smile was meant to be reassuring, but the lump in McCoy's throat swelled ominously and he turned to flee.

White-faced, Kirk had reached out with his other hand, silently pleading with him to stay. Kirk's next words, however, were only for Kate.

"I have never known anyone so lovely," he'd faltered regretfully, his eyes caressing her unhappily. "And if ever I feel the desire to settle down it will be with you, Kate Porter. But there's something I must do.... I've told you about the Enterprise and the ambush. There is a personal score that I have to settle with a certain Klingon, and I won't be able to live with myself, or anyone else for that matter, until I do!"

He had squeezed her hand painfully, his face rigid with the obvious difficulty of it all, but she'd smiled back encouragingly.

"You don't have to make excuses, Jim, I understand, believe me, I do! If I could pilot a starship I'd be out there too." She withdrew her hand gently, rising to return to her post, and McCoy and Kirk stood also, bracing themselves for the last good-bye. Nonetheless, the three of them paused, unwilling to acknowledge the finality of the moment.

Kate sighed.

"If ever you need a good listener, I'll always be available. You can count on finding me here at the library." She'd turned away at that point but not before her grey eyes betrayed her with the shimmer of tears.



McCoy had turned aside helplessly, unable to watch two of his favorite people tear themselves apart. Not daring to speak, he'd leaned over to kiss her quickly on the cheek and headed slowly towards the exit. Even as he moved away he was still able to hear the long pause of another kiss; then it was over and Kirk was beside him in the car.

They rode silently most of the way back to the apartment, Kirk gazing out the side windows at the old buildings beneath them, neither of them saying a word. Only after McCoy skillfully parked the rented vehicle in the backyard dock was Kirk able to face him with reddened eyes.

"That was the hardest thing I've ever had to do, Bones. I'll never forget that incredible lady. Maybe someday...."

"I understand, Jim," McCoy sighed quietly. "I just hope for both of your sakes that it was the right decision."

They'd picked up the Corona at the orbiting Afralian dock where the newly commissioned Federation explorer vessel had undergone installation and testing of priority systems. The ship had been launched from the Dallas drydock just months before, her unveiling heralded with ceremonies and fanfare reminiscent of champagne christenings of twentieth century ocean-going ships. The assignment to such a command had inflated Kirk's ego, rekindling the old self-confident glint in the hazel eyes.

"That sly old fox, Nogura; he knew I could put her through her paces, Bones!" Kirk had grinned at the Corona's chief medical officer knowingly. "It's a challenge every Starfleet captain dreams about. A chance to break in a newly designed ship, a prototype of the future fleet -- Spock would have been so proud --."

McCoy had nodded grimly, watching his captain's exultant face dissolve into a wistful reflection. Kirk promptly frowned and squared his shoulders defensively against the slip, then he'd busied himself with technical manuals and tapes to familiarize himself with the revolutionary machine he'd acquired. McCoy had gone on to his own orientation procedure.

The FEV 801 was a smaller, faster ship than the old Enterprise, built for longer range exploration and greater maneuverability. Kirk had explained that she could deliver formidable firepower if cornered, but that her best defense would be to hit back once and outrun the enemy. McCoy had breathed a relieved sigh. The new medical equipment was comforting but he preferred the idea of avoiding casualties altogether to having to patch up the mutilated bodies of unfortunate crewmen.

McCoy had already endured the vagaries of the improved transporter, scowling customarily at the startled technician when he'd beamed aboard a short time after Kirk's formal inspection of the ship. The captain had given him a brief tour of the bridge until the chief surgeon excused himself to investigate the mysteries of the new Sickbay. He'd entered the premises suspiciously, prepared to dislike every strange facet of the place without exception.

I'm getting too old to change! Then he had grudgingly stationed himself behind his desk as a parade of medical personnel presented themselves for introduction and assignment. The first shock had been the Andorian lieutenant who would be the chief medical assistant, and if it hadn't been for the fact that Kirk needed him, McCoy would have walked out at that instant. Secretly he'd even considered prying Chapel from her newly achieved Earthside career; then reviewing the extraordinary qualifications of his new assistant, glumly concluded that Starfleet would not sanction three top ranking medical officers rattling around the confines of the smaller starship.

Scotty had greeted his captain in the shuttle bay when Kirk returned from inspecting the exterior of the ship, and he'd cheerfully informed them that Sulu, Chekov and Uhura would all be reporting aboard in due time. Furthermore, he'd disclosed that most of the survivors from the engineering crew of the Enterprise had requested and been given duty on the Corona. The eventual reunion, several days later, was barely restrained and personally gratifying to both Kirk and McCoy as they'd liberally accepted non-military greetings all around. When the young first officer abruptly terminated the animated chatter to demand that someone acknowledge his request to come aboard, the other officers and crew people had melted into the background as Kirk soberly faced the impatient young man.

For an instant the lieutenant commander had hesitated, sensing that he'd interrupted something of importance, unprecedented as it seemed, after which he'd gone about his job unobtrusively. It was Sandler's first assignment to a starship and he intended to emulate his commander whenever he had the chance. Kirk had become legendary among Starfleet military echelons, and many cadets were intimidated at the idea of serving with him. The new first officer had no such qualms, however, and he tackled his duties with alacrity, much to Kirk's relief.

McCoy had not missed the look of irritation on Kirk's face over Sandler's initial arrogance, and there was more than passive curiosity in the doctor's scrutiny of the newest member of the command staff. Visiting the bridge the following day, McCoy had briefly allowed himself a comparison of the new ship to the old. But it was an exercise of idle futility, he'd concluded, and it wouldn't do to start off the mission with maudlin "what ifs" and wishful thinking. McCoy was well aware of Kirk's obsession to discover the whereabouts of the missing Vulcan and his almost fanatic belief that Spock was still alive.

And if we do find him, what if he's mentally or physically impaired? No, his Vulcan heritage would not allow survival under those circumstances. We'll either find Spock alive and well...or not at all....

McCoy's ruminations had become depressing, and after all the usual formalities had concluded on the bridge and the ship was underway, he'd invited Kirk to inspect Sickbay.

"You were too busy chortling over your new toy yesterday," McCoy explained drily. "I knew my department could wait until you'd examined all the other nuts and bolts of this baby." And they'd taken the shiny new turbo-lift down into the stainless sterility of the ship's hospital.

The final stage of the mini-tour was spent enjoying a glass of brandy in McCoy's office, and the two relaxed companionably to discuss the crew and the remarkable odds that had brought so many of them together again. Kirk had not mentioned his surprise that the first officer had also assumed the responsibilities of the science officer. And McCoy found the parallel too painful to explore. Kirk's quick acceptance of the invitation to tour Sickbay had only confirmed McCoy's suspicion that the bridge would be an uncomfortable post for the captain until he became more accustomed to the presence of a stranger at the science console.

The third day out from Earth started routinely enough; most of the control systems had checked out correctly with only a few minor adjustments in the engineering department to accommodate Scott's requirements for perfection. Uhura made no comment when a communique arrived from Starbase 39; she piped it down to Kirk's quarters with a flick of a switch and went back to her routine without so much as a batted eyelash. When Kirk called back a few moments later to send a reply, she smiled secretively and dispatched

the message with practiced authority.

Kirk appeared in Sickbay as usual sometime later and plunked himself into the stuffed chair in McCoy's office to wait until the officer had changed watch duty.

"What can I do for you, Captain," the professional voice inquired wearily. Kirk lifted one eyelid to watch his chief surgeon replace his wrinkled and stained green jacket with a softer, blue tunic.

"Have some news for you, Bones," he yawned cheerfully. "I received an urgent request to take on a passenger from Starbase 39. We have an observer coming aboard -- a civilian yet -- seems that we are to accomodate several stress inspections of our innovative medical equipment! Thought you'd like to know -- ."

"An observer! That's all I need, some high-falutin' expert to clutter up my Sickbay while we are tryin' to get used to each other -- as well as all the new gadgets crammed into every available nook and cranny! Why, I've half a mind to lodge a protest -- ."

"Bones! Calm down! I think you're going to like this observer." Kirk smiled playfully at the exasperated McCoy. "The civilian's name is...Christine Chapel."

"Christine! Here...on the Corona? I thought she was Earthside, in a fancy research center -- ."

"So did I, Bones. Apparently she opted for some far out duty, and when she heard we were all together again on the Corona, tried to finagle an assignment to the ship. Since we were all filled up crew-wise, there was nothing else to do but resign her commission -- ."

"Resign her commission!"

"And apply for the post of UFP Civilian Medical Inspector!"

Chapel was beamed aboard a week later to be greeted with a hug and a kiss apiece from McCoy and Kirk.

"We're allowed to kiss civilians," McCoy assured the flustered blonde warmly. "And we can even have dinner together now without a lot of raised eyebrows!" They'd all laughed at that and proceeded to escort her to her quarters with a reasonable amount of decorum. Kirk promptly invited her to dinner in his quarters which she refused with muffled amusement; McCoy took her aside in Sickbay to explain the layout and the descending order of authority.

Chapel seemed genuinely relieved to be back with McCoy and the other familiar faces from the Enterprise, and he promised to take her on a ship-wide tour as soon as she'd unpacked. Spock wasn't mentioned until the tour had ended on the forward observation deck.

"It's a bit smaller than the Enterprise, but nice," Chapel observed gallantly to a contented McCoy. Since they were both "off-duty", so to speak, he'd ordered coffee and cake in an honest attempt to welcome her aboard privately. The view through the thinner but more impregnable bubble wall gave back only a hazy blur as the ship sped through an asteroid belt. The deflectors reacted soundlessly with only small bursts of fluorescence to indicate occasional harmless collisions by minute wayward hunks of space dust.

"I must admit to feeling almost at home," McCoy owned drily, sipping the specially brewed coffee appreciatively. "It isn't the old Enterprise, but it is Jim's ship. And that's enough for me."

They finished the coffee snack silently, watching the simulator scan the darkness ahead of the ship with abnormal magnification; McCoy leaned back





with a sigh of satisfaction as a young female yeoman appeared timidly to whisk away the formal cups and plates. He'd closed his eyes peacefully, speculating briefly on how long it would take Chapel to ask the inevitable question, and had almost drifted off when someone shook him insistently.

"Doctor McCoy," Chapel faltered, suddenly demure. "Has...there been any news of...."

"Spock?" McCoy finished gently. He shook his head and smiled at her flushed embarrassment. "But he's the reason both of us are here, isn't he?"

The dizziness of transporting passed and Spock found himself standing near a rocky depression in the midst of a lava field. He gazed around to gain his bearings and spotted the cache landmark a short distance to his right. After secreting the message capsule at the base of the hiding place, he set out in the direction of the city. It was farther than he'd thought and he computed the distance into time as he loped easily over the rough ground towards the tall fence defining the off-limits zone of the laboratory complex.

The small matter reducer that he had secreted in his boot loosened the heavy fastening on the gate so that he could force it open, and he eased himself smoothly into the cargo unloading area, ears straining for sounds of guards or the hum of electronic surveillance devices. But nothing broke the eerie silence of the compound except his own footsteps as he bent low to the ground and ran swiftly to the rear door that faced the gate. Releasing the lock easily, he slipped through the opening, leaving the door slightly ajar for his return which might, conceivably, be hasty.

The narrow corridor was dimly lit with infra-reds, but his eyes picked out familiar turns in the half-light. He made no sound as he progressed cautiously towards the center of the building, his form blending with the decorative military patterns of the walls. The absence of guards puzzled him and he searched the ceilings for audio sensors that usually protected high risk enclosures until he realized that the place had been constructed before such technology had been available. And monitors had never been installed! The visible lack of guards made his task easier, but a prickly sense of dread crawled down his spine. Had the laboratory become so sinister that it was unnecessary to provide security?

A faint blue glow of light extended from an intersection ahead and he peered stealthily around the corner at double glass doors with research division symbols emblazoned over them. A moving image on the other side of the doors sent a shadow scurrying across the floor, and Spock crept closer to peek into the large room. A gowned figure stood next to a cluttered counter, its hands lifting transparent, cylindrical containers to the light and Spock realized that he'd found the focal point of his nightmares.

As he watched, the figure retreated towards the end of the counter, and the tall Vulcan slipped quietly into the shadow of a broad cabinet just inside the door. The subject of his scrutiny had his back towards the door and had not heard Spock's furtive entrance. In the subdued lighting Spock's night vision could make out the contents of dozens of large vials stacked within reach of the scientist's hands -- round pinkish growths of varying lengths -- and he heard the doctor speaking to them in low, excited tones.

Spock crept to within a few feet of the deeply engrossed Klingon, watching in fascination as the other examined the heavy tubes closely, all the while murmuring soft, unintelligible sounds at them. Then in the cold, sterile atmosphere of that shadowy room Spock's skin crawled with horror.



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The objects in the tubes reacted to the sound of the scientist's voice, moving independently of the silvery liquid enclosing them.

Embryos!

The Vulcan's startled gaze could discern the unmistakable outlines of heads and limbs curled in fetal position, and dozens of pairs of eyes opened to gaze back at him in curiosity. The monstrous nature of the undertaking swept over him like some malodorous stench of Hades, and he lunged instinctively to grasp Kzurin by the neck.

He froze, unable to tear his eyes from the giant test tubes, revulsion rising in his throat, and he stepped back from the Klingon's body to catch his breath convulsively. A jumble of tapes lay at one edge of another counter that housed a small computer console. He selected one of the tapes and inserted it into the slot, watching as the alien words spelled out the suspicion congealing in his mind. Notes on experimental research of months, years, spilled across the screen. Failures, revised formulae, description of donors, life sustaining fluids, the paragraphs and scientific symbols sped into an animated blur as Spock absorbed the meaning of the project.

A new race...superior...invincible.... The voice of Kalauq whispered through his mind: ...you will have such power, dominion over a new race.... And a sickening shudder passed through him again. The meaning was becoming clear but he turned back to the read-outs again, made some adjustments and stared at the words in the frame.

Probability of extraction of viable Vulcan sperm for suspended storage; subject examined and found to be healthy and fertile. Extraction of sperm and freezing process to begin Anzol 32 at 7000m.

He touched a button and the words changed. Samples of sperm examined and found to be suitable for experimentation. Live count of high quality, vigorous activity indicates successful return from frozen state. Procedure to introduce healthiest specimens into medium containing synthetic Klingon ova will begin Japer 54 at 1000r. Daily reports to follow. Newly developed acceleration hormone will stimulate remarkably rapid maturity.

He snapped off the report and slumped back in shock. The laboratory had given up its abomination at last and he felt a cold film of sweat enveloping him as he stifled the need to scream out his rage. He had been trained since childhood to respect all forms of life. But this was artificial life, contrived by the evil mind of an opportunist, and Spock held no reverence for such issue even though it had come from his own body.

It was unthinkable that his body had been violated for such a purpose. Nausea rose in his throat, and trembling with a weakness that threatened his knees, he searched quickly for a weapon to carry out his goal. His vision blurred with disgust and anger so that he stumbled over the unconscious body of the Klingon and would have fallen. The overwhelming urge to scream his deep contempt at the scientist vied with the urgency of his quest and he leaned momentarily against a heavy stool. Then heaving with barely leashed emotions, he wrenched the stool from its moorings, the metal snapping in protest as he lifted it high over his head. The wriggling things in the tubes seemed to sense his intent and writhed frantically in terror.

The chair wavered in his grip for only an instant; then, closing his eyes tightly, he swung the metal bludgeon furiously, sending debris in all directions. Cabinets and carts toppled, scattering contents about him in a cacaphony of breaking glass and splintering metal. His frenzy continued into every corner of the room, leaving nothing intact including ancient volumes of dusty references and overhead illumination panels. Exposed connections flared briefly to release cascading sparks of energy that shot around the room like exploding fireworks. Several of the sparks united with fumes



rising from smashed containers of volatile acids, and small flickers of burning vapors hopped uncertainly across counters and onto the floor.

Glancing about him with some surprise, Spock paused in his fury, acknowledging his loss of control. Stifling a sob, he leaned weakly against a table to survey the damage. The room was in semi-darkness now, only the night lights near the door glowed to lend a spectral twilight over the destruction before him. His eyes widened as a silent puff of flame quickened and spread to engulf one corner of the room in radiance. Hungry fingers of fire advanced towards him with increasing momentum, and he remembered the body of the Klingon too late. Flames were already leaping over the body, rushing out in all directions, forcing Spock back against the wall in retreat.

The place was ablaze with snapping and crackling flames reaching from the floor to the roof, the skin-searing heat licking at his boots. It was getting hard to breathe and he was suddenly aware of the odor of burning flesh. Quickly he bolted through the door, panic replacing the demented anger of a few moments before, and unmindful of the burning pain in his hands, he ran blindly through the gathering smoke down the corridor to the rear door.

There were faint alarms from the corridor and the ancient system would, no doubt, bring others to the building and his presence would be discovered. He had no valid reason to be on the premises and although he had given no specific destination for his ascension to the surface, being found in the laboratory might raise more questions than he could answer. He concluded half-wildly that he must escape from the complex before anyone saw him.

Seconds later he had reached the outer door, and listening carefully for sounds of approaching guards, yanked the unlocked door open and fled into the darkness. He reached the gate just as the floodlights blinked on around the grounds and a high pitched siren sent out its ear-piercing summons.

The gate was still slightly ajar and he gasped in relief as he melted into the shadowy ravine on the other side of the street. Crouching down to conceal any movement, he ran swiftly towards the path that would lead him back to the lava field. It was to be expected that searchers would be dispatched as soon as the broken gate was discovered, but more important to him at the moment was the fact that more time had elapsed than he'd originally allowed to regain contact with the ship. If the sensor probe scanned the beam-down point and found no Vulcan readings, the ship would leave without him. He would be stranded.

His legs quickened powerfully but the mental strain he'd encountered in the lab had taken most of his strength. Exhaustion limits were hampering his pace, and he felt sudden misgivings.

I must...continue...just a few more seconds.... Over there! It is the cache landmark where I beamed down...just in time....

He was gasping when he came to in the transporter room and Kahlor gaped at him in alarm, noting the torn clothing and the blackened hands.

"Kodor! You've been hurt...what happened?"

Spock waved him off wearily but the Klingon wouldn't be ignored and grasping his commander's arm, he examined the scorched skin in grave astonishment. Spock collapsed onto the nearest stool, still panting with exertion, knowing that he'd have to make some sort of explanation.

"There was a fire...."

Kahlor half-carried him to the dispensary, insisting that the burned



hands be treated immediately, and Spock related some of his adventure on the way, omitting the grisly details of his discovery. Medical treatment was quickly dispensed and Spock brushed aside the technician's insistence for further examination, returning to his quarters with Kahlor at his heels.

The Klingon pressed for a more detailed report but Spock only reassured him that the message capsule had been delivered and that the laboratory had been destroyed. One terse statement summed up the venture; Spock would say nothing further.

"I was successful in accomplishing what I set out to do; that is all that is necessary at this point." And the Vulcan turned away grimly to concentrate on the throbbing pain in his hands.

Kahlor was silent for a moment, then suggested helpfully that Spock retire to his bed for the remainder of the day.

"Kotaan is on the bridge at present and we are preparing to leave orbit as you commanded. Any change in course?"

Spock shook his head gratefully and headed for his sleeping area.

"Just get the ship away from Klingon space for now; I will compute a new course tomorrow. Our next step is to intercept Kalauq."

Kahlor grunted in reply and left quickly to return to his duties. Spock sank onto his bed, lowering his hands carefully onto his chest. A healing trance would be essential if he were to resume his plans the following day. Kalauq would not be wasting any time in putting his plans into play and Spock did not intend to be far behind.

The Emptor slipped past Klingon boundaries without challenge, the powerful cruiser swallowed conveniently by the anonymity of deep space as their purpose thrust them into the next parsec. Kahlor and Kotaan were unmindful of the smoldering rage in Spock's thoughts, despite a decrease in daily conferences to improvise an intercept course for the flagship, Aerrex. Spock kept his obsession to himself, retreating more frequently into the preoccupation that had taken command of his logic and swept aside the teachings of Vulcan philosophy.

He had increased the ship's speed several times within the span of half a parsec and ordered additional course changes. The ship's performance eventually surpassed suggested engine capacity, and Kahlor's frown deepened with each passing watch as he monitored energy read-outs.

"Commander Kodor, engines show signs of strain and have entered the margin of superheating instability. We may blow a main circuit if we continue at maximum speed." Kahlor had come up behind the commander's post to report softly, his eyes maintaining impersonal subservience despite the warning tone of his voice.

"I am well aware of the situation, Sub-Commander Kahlor," Spock returned calmly. "Our course must take us through Federation territory, a 'short-cut' if you will, to intercept Kalauq before he can infect other lesser domains with his poisonous influence."

"We will be in no position to intercept, let alone defend ourselves," Kahlor protested, "if we are dead in space, Commander! The ship must be allowed to recharge for a short period, at least for several hours."

"I have already planned for such an opportunity, my friend. Our course changes will lead us past my home planet, Vulcan. The ship will maintain orbit for two planet revolutions to recharge energy units while our invisibility screens are still viable, and allow me enough time to attend to a personal matter."

Kahlor frowned and moved around to stare directly into the Vulcan's face. "Personal matter?" he queried softly.

"Yes. I must return to my parent's burial grounds. I wish to pay final tribute and prepare myself for the possibility of death. To challenge such a foe as that of the Supreme Warrior will be extremely dangerous --."

"You will not face him alone, Commander!"

Spock smiled grimly and shook his head at the other's reassurance. "My affair with Kalauq will be on a one-to-one basis, Kahlor. You may have to finish the battle but I will confront the tyrant first, on my own terms. Understood?"

Spock's tone had been adamant and Kahlor was silent, his eyes searching his superior's face with long-suffering resignation.

"As you wish, Commander," he shrugged.

Spock nodded sagely, steeping his hands in thoughtful speculation. "You will inform Kotaan of the ship's itinerary and prepare for the recharging procedure. We are already approaching sensor range and must caution the crew concerning unnecessary noise. I will inform you of my coordinates before I beam down to the planet's surface. Return to your duties, Sub-Commander, our conversation is beginning to cause some curiosity.

The ship drifted into orbit around Vulcan, invisibility screens intact, and Spock tersely ordered Kahlor to take command. Vulcan Space Central would not be able to detect the ship in its normal disposition, but the screens would have to be dropped for the interval required for the transporter to function. Timing was of the essence, and Spock cautioned Kotaan to monitor the procedure closely, cutting the timing to a fine millisecond whereupon the screens would automatically reactivate.

Pick-up at pre-designated coordinates would take place in exactly two revolutions and Spock would be at the coordinates unless he had been apprehended and arrested. In that event the Emptor was ordered to leave orbit immediately and proceed with the pursuit of Kalauq and the Aerrex. Spock had been unswerving in his instructions: under no circumstances were the ship's personnel to be endangered searching for him; the capture of Kalauq was to remain the primary objective of the mission.

The new operative blinked as his instruments flashed red for an instant, then returned to normal.

"Supervisor Synark, something disrupted sensor scan! It's gone now, but there was something...!"

"What was the size and configuration?" The grim-faced supervisor eyed the younger officer sternly, speculating hesitantly whether a reprimand was necessary for his unseemly emotional outburst. But no, it was the young Vulcan's first day at the complex; better to let him become more acquainted with his duties before chastising his behavior.

"It looked like a ship, sir, a rather large one from the scant readings I received." Suntar blinked in embarrassment as he realized his blunder. Recovering quickly, he turned back to his console.

"Perhaps a malfunction -- I'll analyze the read-outs and report back to you." And he bent to the task in earnest. The supervisor nodded and returned to his desk, frowning slightly at the interruption of routine. Moments later he frowned again and looked up inquiringly from the report Suntar had placed before him. He scanned it a second time and shook his

head.

"This report indicates sensors detected a Klingon warship for thirty milliseconds. There have been no warnings of Klingons in the area. How do you explain this contradiction?"

Suntar twitched nervously under his superior's stern gaze but his voice did not waver as he repeated the contents of the report as well as his earlier malfunction theory.

The older Vulcan tapped his nose thoughtfully. "There have been no other sightings since your first notice. If there are Klingons in the area we should have had more information by now. Maintain scans on that particular area for the rest of your watch and report any further changes to me at once, Suntar. We cannot chase unseen invaders." And suppressing an amused smile, Synark waved the youngster back to his console.

The disorientation of transporting passed quickly and Spock looked around at his mother's deserted garden. He hadn't been home since his parents' death in an air-car accident years before. A caretaker had been hired to look after the grounds shortly thereafter; but apparently, when Spock had failed to reappear following the Enterprise's return to drydock, the services of the caretaker had been discontinued and the property allowed to fall into disrepair. Since under Vulcan law property must be defined as abandoned for five years before the authorities could claim it for public land, Spock estimated that the estate would soon qualify if he were unable to return.

He sank down wearily on one stone bench that had survived many harsh seasons of Vulcan sun and eroding sand storms and, absently plucking at the overgrown hedge that had nearly buried the bench in brambles, he gazed out over the encroaching desert. A hot, dry breeze lifted tufts of sand at his feet, exposing remnants of the stone path that led to the house. His mother's favorite fruit tree still stood near the morning room that Sarek had ordered constructed when Spock had reached the age of limited excursions around the grounds, and Spock stared at the tree longingly, noting the unpruned branches that had become entangled with an enthusiastic vine. One small fruit hung near the ground and Spock was moved to pick it, raising it to his nose to recall the musty scent with anticipation. The juicy crispness brought back youthful gratification on long, hot, carefree afternoons, and he greedily nibbled it down to the seedy center.

Out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed the silvery spring still bubbling up through its recently cracked marble basin, and remembering the necessity of water for his excursion, filled his water container and capped it tightly before draping it efficiently over his shoulder to join his light back pack. Then, with one final glance at the house, he strode briskly through the broken fence into the wavering heat of the desert.

He walked all night, immersed in thoughts of his parents, oblivious to the screams of the lematya and other night creatures. A chill had settled over the still warm sand beneath his feet but it wasn't until the second sun climbed over the horizon that he paused to rest and drink from the water pouch. He would not eat until he reached the deep catacombs where the ritual of communion in the ancestral crypt would be observed and bread would be broken to be consumed after dutiful prayers. He would then perform the "casting of life upon the sacred waters" by using the other half of the loaf as a sacrifice, flinging it far into the dark, reflective pool that lay at the back of the caverns.

Spock had visited the grave site once before Sarek's and Amanda's deaths -- during his Kahs-Wan, the youthful ritual of achieving Vulcan manhood. The ordeal had been doubly important to Sarek because Spock's acceptance by Vulcan society hinged on his ability to survive and successfully complete the traditional male pilgrimage. The extra weight of his double heritage had made the goal more hazardous, his human half denounced as a weakness rendering him incapable of attaining full Vulcan capabilities. His triumph had engendered a brief glance of pride from his human mother, and a self-satisfied grunt from his stone-faced sire. But his popularity among Vulcan youth had increased.

The Place of Sorrows, as translated from the ancient Vulcan tongue, lay in the exact center of the T'Durbi Desert at the edge of the estates of the clan Xtmprsqzntwlfb. T'Pau, Sarek's sister, owned the other half of the sandy expanse, and Spock often wondered about the value of owning such a useless piece of property. His father had explained it simply: "Our ancestors will remain unmolested in the isoation and protection of the desert. There would be no reason for anyone else to venture out into the life-threatening desolation that surrounds the burial grounds. It is for that reason that our ancestors selected such a place -- it would continue to be a place of interest to no one but the clan of Xtmprsqzntwlfb, a perfect resting place for the remains of family members."

A logical assumption, young Spock had concurred, and had given it no further thought. But he was the last of the clan, T'Pau's death having occurred just a short time before Sarek's and Amanda's. With his own death, the desert area would revert to the governing council, and his ancestors' resting places might be jeopardized by efficient reclamation of the land for agricultural purposes or by any other number of projects to which the land could be put to use.

His parents' sudden deaths had unexpectedly earmarked him to ensure the continuing provident care for the burial grounds. However, this sojourn would not allow the precise opportunity to transact his burial assignment as tradition decreed, and he labored under a new anxiety that ancestral security would be breached because of his irresponsibility...

Vulcan's suns were high overhead by the time Spock recognized the familiar monolith beyond a spill of lichen covered rock. The large, crudely shaped double cross of stone had graced the entry to the underground caverns since the time of the beginning, its five-pointed shadow stretching across the surrounding rubble of broken rock and sand. The unique configuration of the thing resembled a blunt six-pointed star, the longest tip stabbed deeply into the escarpment overlooking the desert. No one knew exactly where it had come from, or how long it had been there; but it had stood against the everchanging terrain effectively, marking the entrance to the family tomb for centuries.

Spock hurried across the last few wind-swept hummocks to the trapdoor release at the base of the tall sculpture. Its secret location had been revealed to him many years before at the conclusion of his traditional youthful pilgrimage to achieve manhood. The opening beckoned benignly, a dim inner light casting faint shadows on the descending stone steps that led into the cool depths; and he eased into the shadows without hesitation, emerging seconds later at the edge of a large greeting chamber. An intricately carved, massive altar dominated the center of the vault, its perpetual flame



flickering wildly in the draft. All of his Vulcan ancestors were here, the account of each passing life recorded in the aged open volume resting on its pedestal of honor beside the flame. It was a place of grieving; and the darkness pressed against him as though suffused with bereavement.

Shrugging off a feeling of doom, Spock removed one dry torch from a container near the foot of the stairs. He walked stiffly to the altar, touching the tip of the dried shaft to the flame until it flared; then stepped back to stand softly illuminated in the silence as he reverently appraised the ancient tomb.

His parents' sepulcher lay to the right in a small alcove. Memories of their burial flashed back as he stared bleakly at the markings chiseled carefully into the granite divider.

He'd been summoned to Vulcan on an emergency leave, his telepathic channels strangely silent, only to learn that his parents' bodies were already at the tomb. Barely arriving at the mausoleum in time for interment, he'd been inconsolably numb while watching the two coffins being rolled into place in the stone vault. Only the over-riding shock had kept him stiffly correct during the solemn rites of the dead as an earlier memory of leave-taking brought to mind a long forgotten pang of remorse.

His fragile Vulcan facade had been in danger of collapse as he heard his mother's voice again, and his mind replayed the details of his youthful decision. His rejection of his father's choice of education for him had been uncomfortable for all of them, and he knew he'd never be forgiven for renouncing the Vulcan Academy for the unknown world of Starfleet. But Amanda had attempted a hasty reconciliation just the same.

"Remember, Spock," she had cautioned gently. "We'll always welcome you back, no matter what your father says!" And she'd glanced back at Sarek in admonishment, provoking an imperceptible lift of her husband's chin.

Spock had hardly dared meet his father's eyes, his defiance of Vulcan tradition reinforcing the rift between them. And he'd almost wavered in his determination, considering one last ditch effort to attain the trust of his venerate sire. But something inside him had shriveled and died at the coldness in his father's face, and he'd dropped his gaze quickly to raise his hand in the formal salute of farewell.

His mother had kissed him good-bye earlier, before they left the house, understanding his resolve to remain sternly composed for the final scene of departure. There had been an instant of empathy between them and he was certain that she sensed his guilty qualms. But his father had donned a stoic air of indifference, precluding an inclination towards regret. Only later, after a comfortable mutual respect had been restored during the fateful trip to Babel aboard the Enterprise, had Spock been able to discern the secret pride in his father's eyes at his son's worthy achievements. However, the tenuous esteem had been prematurely extinguished by the malfunction of a tiny computer switch controlling the descent of a trusted air-car.

After the rituals of burial had concluded and the tomb had been sealed for eternal preservation, he'd returned immediately to the Enterprise, leaving an appointed Elder to settle family affairs and see to the wills. And later on he'd reluctantly agreed to arranging a caretaker for the house.

Spock sighed deeply and sank to his knees for a brief period of meditation



LAVENA KAY  
KID 1984

before his parents' resting place, hoping to achieve the correct mental fortitude in preparation for the next rite. The purging of all emotion before communion with the ancestral gods was the most difficult of all the ministrations involved, and he let his mind withdraw into pleasanter thoughts of childhood in accord with the cleansing. No traces of anger or hatred would be permitted and he must empty his consciousness altogether of the underlying purpose of his visit.

Following the ceremony of communion he felt spent, drained of all feelings of rage and grief, and had positioned himself before the altar of repentance to send up his plea for audience. The trance settled over him slowly, closing off all awareness of his surroundings; as he relaxed into the attitude of ancestral supplication, he welcomed the flowing comfort of hypnotic transference, his body shuddering with the reception as he retreated into a pose of deep concentration. His face softened into quiet abstraction, and a peaceful solitude tempered the gloom as the torch burned low in its niche.

The dying flickers of flame sent eerie bursts of light and shadow across the silence. The last heir to the clan of Xtrmprsqtzntwlf b roused abruptly with a soft moan. He lifted his head slowly to stare through the dimness towards the eternal flame, tears streaming down his face unchecked. His voice hoarse with unleashed emotion, he raised his arms in blind entreaty to the forebears of his race.

"Forgive me, my fathers, I have lost the way...I require more time before I can return to this place. I must continue...the search. By the gods, I am so alone...!"

And in one piercing cry of "Vengeance is mine!" the trance dissolved.

A final, brilliant flare from the torch illuminated the kneeling figure on the stone floor, one ravaged soul trembling with convulsive sobs of frustration and loss. The madness had begun.

## CHAPTER 9

# THE SEARCH

Kahlor was waiting for Spock in the transporter room when the other beamed back from Vulcan, and the Klingon greeted him with apparent relief.

"We are prepared to leave orbit, Commander, and await your orders as to course and speed." He saluted stiffly in front of the Klingon technician at the controls, noting the look of disorientation in the Vulcan's eyes. There was a long pause as Spock gathered his balance and stepped off the platform.

"Set course for the Tholian Assembly as per computed elevation and velocity to intersect with free space." He squared his shoulders and straightened his tunic absently. "And I wish to see you and Sub-Commander Kootaan in my quarters as soon as we are underway."

"Yes, sir," Kahlor murmured respectfully, leading the way into the corridor. He glanced at his commander once more as the other headed towards his cabin, then the Klingon stepped into the officers' lift to the Emptor's bridge.

Spock prowled his rooms restlessly, waiting for his subordinates to appear. The miniature video screen reflected forward scans, computer feedback at retarded spin enabling normal interpretation of approaching star systems and spacial intervals. He studied it absently, watching the passage of outer asteroids and star clusters that peppered that area of the Federation of Planets. The ship was accelerating into warp speed, the slight increase of stress vibration noticeable only to his subliminal senses, and after a moment he punched several lighted squares on his desk to trigger the read-out screen into projecting facts and figures. Warp six flashed briefly, wavered and stabilized into blue symbols, and he felt, instinctively, the steadied attitude of the vessel.

A short time later his entry buzzer announced the two Klingon officers and he released the double-sequenced door lock to admit them. Kootaan handed him a taped report, then proceeded to recite its contents himself.

"Two weeks until we break free of Federation space, Commander. Our cloaking device is working properly and we have encountered no interference from Federation probes. Do you have further orders?" He stared expectantly at his leader, having been warned by Kahlor earlier to remain militarily correct in view of the Vulcan's new identity. .

"Yes, Kootaan, I wish to send a message."



"A message...sir?" Kootaan flushed as his superior raised one eyebrow at the spontaneous query.

"We must contact Klyntee and inform him of our plans. He will need to know when to make his first move and I must allow him an estimated position and time schedule to allow him to complete his preparations. Since we are headed away from the pirate base and can approximate interception of the Aerrex, we must send the information immediately before we are out of range." He held out a tape and Kootaan took it gingerly, questioning only with his eyes. Spock's face softened with the merest of humor.

"It explains, Sub-Commander, that we are proceeding to Tholian Space to rendezvous with the Aerrex in quadrant four sometime within the next two months." He added slowly, "I want it sent uncoded."

"Uncoded, Commander?" Alarm widened the young officer's gaze even as Spock nodded reassuringly.

"Use the special channel we agreed on, Kootaan. It is used very seldom and was preselected, if you will recall, by Klyntee himself on recommendation of his communications officer."

Kootaan subsided into humility. "I will comply, Commander Kodor! I apologize for my -- ."

"No apology necessary, Kootaan," Spock chided, dismissing the chagrined officer with a wave of his hand. "Just...carry on." His sigh went unnoticed as Kootaan scurried into the corridor.

Kahlor had remained silent, assessing his leader's irregular mood. Spock motioned him to a chair opposite his desk and seated himself wearily.

"Kahlor, how soon do you intend to scan for the Aerrex?"

"As soon as we attain free space, Commander Kodor. We dare not chance detection while still in Federation territory, even though our new sensors can operate independently of the cloaking screen. There is always the chance that the Federation has developed a new sentry unit."

He leaned forward uneasily. "I do not mean to question your intentions, Commander, but do you think it wise to transmit while still in this parsec?"

"We are far enough from main Earth outposts to avoid attention, Sub-Commander. The low frequency will not be monitored -- only an accidental sweep of minor frequencies would discover the transmission. And that probability is very remote -- odds of 5,283,462.1 to 1 to be exact."

Kahlor's eyebrows shot up at his superior's mathematical musing.

"Very well, sir; you are naturally familiar with such procedure." He leaned back stiffly and surveyed the suddenly pensive Vulcan for signs of distress, wondering what had become of the nonplussed commanding officer of so many weeks before.

He must be reverting totally to Vulcan philosophy; the emotional effect of the Klingon conditioning is wearing thin! Kahlor shook off his apprehension recklessly.

"Your trip to your parents' graves -- do you want to talk about it?"

Spock gazed at him impassively, automatically analyzing the other's intent, then shook his head.

"It would be of long interpretation, Kahlor, and little interest to an 'outworlder'. My future is now, on this ship, working with you and the others to stop Kalauq."

"It might help if you unburdened some of that hostility, Commander. You must remain strong for what is to come -- ."

"It was merely a pilgrimage of duty," Spock responded simply. "I had to reassure my ancestors -- and myself -- that this mission is necessary. The journey was...enlightening," he defined smoothly.

Kahlor nodded, undaunted. "We have come a long way together, my friend, and I do consider you to be my friend, Kodor," he affirmed quietly. "I just want you to know that we -- Kootaan and I -- will stand by you until the end. If we are to face death as companions in arms, surely we can be free to express our feelings towards one another -- or are Vulcans not allowed to exchange the support of friendship?"

"Your offer is quite...commendable, Kahlor; but I, also, consider you and Kootaan to be my friends." He stood gracefully, a signal for Kahlor to leave, continuing to speak even as Kahlor moved towards the door. "We will triumph, Kahlor; I feel sure of it, but I do not know if we will survive. Do you understand?"

The Klingon turned and their glances locked for a fleeting instant; nodding silently, he'd backed through the door to return to his duties. Rapport had been re-established and he had once more been placated by the Vulcan's gentle logic. But he'd also remembered the obsession in the other's eyes upon his return from the surface of his home planet. It had become apparent that the two Klingons could only trail in the wake of Kodor's determination. Kalauq would be ultimately destroyed; but at what cost?

Captain's Log - Stardate 5231.9: The Corona has departed Earth's solar system on a course heading towards Klingon space near the outer barrier. We have attained warp speed without difficulty except for a slight vibration at warp seven. Engineer Scott is working on the solution and expects to repeat the test in twenty-four hours. All systems are go, including the automatic shut-down of life support whenever crew people are absent from areas such as the recreation and storage levels. This should amount to substantial savings in energy and provide greater cruising capacity from our main energy cells as a result. The phasers have yet to be tested, but I have scheduled weaponry programs to commence oh-six-hundred hours tomorrow and have instructed Mr. Chekov and Mr. Sulu to supervise two assigned junior officers during the trials. Mission proceeding as expected.

The first official staff meeting was held twelve days out from Earth. Kirk was late, a malfunction in the coffee dispenser in the officers' dining room having caused delay in early morning procedure, and a grumpy captain had been dealt with promptly.

By the time Kirk had swallowed his second cup of manually-brewed stimulant in his quarters, the staff had assembled silently in the main briefing room and had assumed their usual positions around the octagonal table. Sandler was nearly to the point of taking charge when the captain swept brusquely into the room, acknowledging everyone with a curt nod. No explanations were necessary; tea had been a poor substitute for the other officers' morning meals as well.

Despite a late beginning, Kirk soon had the center of attention, fielding departmental problems encountered during the first few days of Corona's initiation. Kirk paused during Scott's tape, midway through repairs and adjustments.

"How about warp seven, Scotty? We won't make our schedule at this pace!"

"Aye, sir; the problem should be solved by the time the meetin' adjourns. I've got three o' my best workin' on it."

Kirk nodded and touched the "resume" control. It signalled imminent completion of the meeting and all relaxed confidently. But at the tape's end

Kirk didn't release them; instead, he held up both hands for silence.

"I have an announcement to make and there will be no discussion to follow."

The staff officers stirred curiously.

"Although you have been previously instructed as to the primary purpose of our voyage, gentlemen, there is an additional element which I have chosen to keep private until now." He waited for the puzzled apprehension to settle, then mustered a phlegmatic smile.

"As you all know, there have been Federation-wide rumors circulating for many months that our former first officer, Commander Spock, may still be alive. While no one knows for sure where he is or for what purpose he may have been abducted, it is generally felt by our military authorities that he is being used for some dangerous scheme, possibly by the Klingons or the Romulans."

The room bristled with indignation and Kirk acknowledged the collective concern with patience, glancing around with subtle entreaty.

"We have been appointed, in the interests of security as well as humane regard for a prominent citizen of our closest ally, to investigate and pursue any and all information acquired during the period of Spock's mysterious disappearance."

The ensuing approval was punctuated with one loud protest.

"I object, Sir!" Sandler sprang to his feet as murmurs of conjecture died abruptly. "This is an experimental ship, not intended for search and pursuit procedures, and I ask by what right you assume responsibility for such an undertaking!" His face had become flushed with anger and he pointedly ignored several surreptitious mutters of sit down and shut up as he defied Kirk's seniority.

"This ship is a relative unknown, Captain, sir," he continued hotly, "a prototype that is just as likely to blow up as not if something goes wrong. Furthermore, I signed aboard for a trial mission, not to go charging around the galaxy chasing ghosts!"

Kirk's face darkened ominously as he stared at the first officer, the choices of discipline for insubordination paling against the young man's outward hostility. Scott, on the other hand, found his tongue quickly and growled a stern reprimand.

"You're out of order, Mister! Sit down and rephrase your objections with the proper respect!"

There was silence as Scott's words found fertile ground and Sandler slumped back into his seat. McCoy glared balefully at his hands; Sulu stared unseeing at the center of the table; and Uhura frowned with uncharacteristic embarrassment. The former staff officers of the Enterprise were dumbfounded at the young first officer's outburst, but their obvious disapproval gave Kirk the impetus he needed.

"Youth and inexperience are no excuse for your remarks, Mr. Sandler," Kirk allowed icily. "If you wish to confirm our official orders you may come to my quarters after this meeting has adjourned. You'll find they've been signed by Admiral Nogura himself. Commander Spock is...was...the best first officer in the fleet; his unique capabilities as leading science officer in Starfleet of galactic importance. It is our purpose to determine if he is being used by the Klingons to learn about our defense systems and experimental weaponry. The fact that the Enterprise was destroyed by a Klingon/Romulan device is reason enough to suspect the real purpose of Spock's abduction: possible invasion and inter-galactic war."

There were audible gasps around the table as Kirk paused to catch his breath. He shook his head ruefully.

"It is my belief, gentlemen, that our former first officer was captured for one of several probabilities -- primary of which was to cause suspicion of defection to one of our unfriendly neighbors. And Romulan contacts have heard reports of a Vulcan moving freely within Klingon military circles. Defection of a Federation officer would cause a certain amount of consternation as far as the Defense Department is concerned. Channeling manpower and weaponry into one area of defense against attack might well prove ineffective in the event the Klingons and Romulans use another approach.

"In other words, Spock's capture could have been planned as a diversion, an attempt to extract Federation military secrets, or simply a kidnapping for ransom. However, since we have neither been contacted nor challenged so far, the latter would seem to be unlikely. Starfleet has been working hand in hand with CIP and has come up with nothing but a few questionable leads. Admiral Nogura, on the other hand, appointed the former crew of the Enterprise to follow up any and all clues that seem viable. While our outward purpose remains as that of a break-in crew for the Corona, testing engines, weapons, life support systems and other experimental innovations of the ship, we will at any time change course and enter unfriendly space if it involves the possibility of locating Mr. Spock. Any further doubts may be discussed in my quarters..."

The room was still, although Scott and Kyle inclined their heads sharply to indicate support of Kirk's commitment. Sandler cleared his throat noisily and Kirk stared at him suspiciously.

"Yes, Mr. Sandler, what is it?"

"I just wanted to say, sir, that upon reconsideration, your directive seems logical and reasonable to me. I wish to apologize for behaving indiscreetly -- I was unaware of the serious implications of Mr. Spock's absence." He squirmed uncomfortably under Kirk's stare. "I would also like to suggest that we make a few unscheduled stops at trading posts along the way to seek out scuttlebutt among the natives which might provide a key to the Vulcan's whereabouts."

Kirk eyed him distantly for a moment longer, then nodded reluctant compromise.

"Welcome to the club, Mr. Sandler; your suggestion is well taken. I now appoint you a committee of one to follow up on it. You may select three crewmen to accompany you on your excursions. And on that note, gentlemen, the briefing is dismissed."

Everyone but McCoy rose quickly and filed out of the room. Kirk circled the table and sank into a chair next to his chief medical officer.

McCoy grinned roguishly. "I must congratulate you, Captain; you sure pulled an about-face on your first officer. But why do I still get the impression that you trust him less than the rest of us?"

Kirk shook his head, nonplussed. "At first, I thought Nogura had planted that one on board to keep an eye on me. But Nogura would have sent a woman.... No Bones, I think he just needs a few pushes in the right direction now and then. I'll make a first officer out of him yet! Of course, Spock could do a much better job, logically, and unemotionally." He sighed and motioned McCoy toward the door and they disappeared down the corridor.

"We have attained free space, Commander!" The navigation officer saluted the command position smartly. "Request confirmation on course and speed."

"Continue on present course, Kannel. Set scanners on wide intensity



for the estimated position of the flagship."

"Yes, Commander!" The Klingon swiveled and returned to his post with military precision. Spock surveyed the bridge from beneath lowered eyelids, the dimness concealing his scrutiny from the others.

How far can I trust them when it comes time to choose? They are Klingon born and bred -- I am an alien. To whom will they swear loyalty? My position has been indubitably compromised; I can no longer return home except as a traitor, no one would believe otherwise.

"Commander!" The astrosience officer swung around from his viewer breathlessly, his eyes dark with elation. "We've found her! The Aerrex, sir!"

"Project position and course on main screen and instruct computer to plot intersect point for the Emptor!" Spock slipped out of his chair towards the navigation console, monitoring the crewman's response to the computer read-outs. The helmsman nodded curtly towards his commander, his grin wide with appreciation.

"You predicted almost to the exact degrees, Commander! Even the computer could not have come closer!"

Spock acknowledged the admiration absently, striding to the center of the bridge where he could stand unhampered, hands clasped behind his back loosely, his face carefully expressionless.

"Steady as she goes, Helmsman. Communications! Let me know as soon as we are within hailing frequency distance."

The intervening days dragged slowly, computer figures changing correspondingly with the ever imminent target, and Spock alternated pacing the bridge with sitting impatiently in his command chair. Watches changed; chronometers switched from one day to the next; and still the ship continued, its engines driving her powerfully through the deadly vacuum of space. Each time Kahlor and Kootaan came on duty Spock left the bridge for a sparse meal and a brief trance-induced nap. It was during such a nap that the duty communications officer reluctantly interrupted the privacy of his superior's quarters, the blinking summons of the intercom a welcome respite from the suspense.

"Kodor here," came the terse response.

"Sir! Have picked up a distress signal from the Aerrex -- ."

"I'm on my way to the bridge."

The distress signal was automatic, still too far away to emit anything but an indication of trouble. Spock ordered a decrease in speed -- they were approaching the Tholian boundaries and might have to pivot in retreat.

As the Emptor narrowed the distance from the signal's origin, Spock maintained constant vigil with Communications. At warp three, the scanners had approximated rendezvous with the Aerrex in six days, but the recently installed sensor scan would cover that distance in mere minutes, enabling the Emptor to assess the problem in advance -- unless it were a trap.

Chingek was off the beaten track, a trading outpost of questionable repute, but without question, the only point of civilization for half a quadrant. Klingon and Romulan ships were regular patrons, as were countless other alien ships, stopping off for repairs, rest, or a bit of smuggling on the side.

Sandler, Kyle, Sulu, and Jones prowled the drug shops and bazaars to



pick up gossip in every language via microscopic translators imbedded behind each ear. Tiny transistors sewn into special pockets on their jackets recorded each word systematically for later study. The four had almost given up gathering anything worth noting and were preparing to return to their beaming point when Kyle spotted a small tent with flags fluttering gaily from the peak. It hadn't been there when they'd beamed down several hours before, and as a last minute resort, decided to give it a parting shot.

The words had been halting, mouthed with the wandering mentality of a drug addicted traveler amongst exotic trinkets and powders. But the results were definite enough to take back to Kirk.

"Thekur IV, sir!" Kyle panted, his last minute lunge for the transporter beam precipitated by the lingering inspection of a doe-eyed young thing wrapped in clouds of transparent chiffon.

"Yes, sir," Sandler confirmed, his eyes reflecting rebuke at the wilting Kyle. "The words translated as: 'saw a strange sight in the Greylong Caboon on Thekur IV...a Vulcan, speaking Klingoni, accompanied by two others...all three apparently officers in off-duty clothing; but the Vulcan was drunker 'n a skunk....'"

Kirk's eyes registered dismay followed by barely concealed fury. "Spock -- a Klingon officer -- drunker than -- My God, what the hell have they done to him!" Then, "Helmsman! Get back into uniform and compute course to Thekur IV: take us out at warp nine."

"Aye, aye, sir," Sulu snapped to attention, saluted and ran for the corridor. The other three disengaged their equipment and handed it to Kirk silently as he repeated a most succinct observation.

"Time is of the essence, gentlemen."

The Corona streaked towards Thekur IV, delicately skirting the neutral zones around Klingon space. Patrol vessels, strangely docile, appeared at the edges of the zones periodically but made no threatening advances.

"Do not provoke an incident, gentlemen," Kirk admonished the navigator and helmsman quietly. "We cannot spare the time to fend off prickly patrols. Keep well away from the perimeters of the zones."

The computer made the warning unnecessary, but Kirk felt better for having said it. He hadn't remembered how long it took to get from one quadrant to another, even with improved power. His impatience welled to the surface more often these days -- time seemed to be crawling by more slowly than he'd ever remembered.

What will we find at Thekur IV; will it turn out to be another wild goose chase? Monotony occupied most of his waking hours, especially during the arbitrations over petty disputes. Invariably, by late watch, he'd end up in McCoy's office to share a "medicinal" prescription of Saurian brandy and an hour or two of conversation. More often than not he felt better as a result. But after a few weeks of pounding through space, he'd reminisced on just about everything from Academy days to his childhood in Iowa. I wonder if Spock has found someone to play chess with on his ship...if Klingons play chess?

The Corona passed all remaining trials with relative ease, Sandler wrapping up the final testing of ship-wide communications the day the cruiser swung into orbit around the trading post. His recently assumed penchant for reconnaissance had continued undiminished, and as the ship settled into the relaxed attitude of orbit achieved, Kirk announce overnight shore leave for Sandler's party as well as the majority of the crew. The first officer gathered his team together again, vowing fervently to marshal every scrap



of information available on the missing Vulcan. Kirk had elected to stay aboard, issuing last minute orders via McCoy's office.

"It would do you good to get off the ship for a while, Jim. Why don't you join the rest of the crew?"

"It's not my kind of port, Bones," Kirk had returned cryptically. "Besides, who'd keep you company?" Smiling faintly, he'd helped himself generously to another glass of brandy.

"Good thing I told Sulu to bring back a fresh supply of the stuff," McCoy grumbled, eyeing Kirk's glass uneasily. "You planning on cultivating a hang-over, Captain? You'll have a dilly if you don't go easy!"

Kirk snorted in amusement. "I have an excellent doctor who is well schooled in hang-overs." He sipped happily as McCoy sputtered helplessly. "Besides, I have a feeling we're on a milk run -- even the Klingons aren't taking pot shots at us anymore! And I have one of the most efficient, outspoken first officers in the galaxy; he can practically run the ship without me, Dr. McCoy." He broke off petulantly to down the contents of his glass, grimacing at the consequence of his overindulgent impulse.

"So you're going to let him run the ship while you drown your guilt in alcohol, is that it, Jim?" McCoy glared angrily as his superior poured a refill. "That young Sandler, he's still wet behind the ears! And Scotty can't take over -- he's up to his hips in new problems, nursing those overworked engines like a mother hen."

"Don't lecture me, Bones. I'm well aware of the double strain on Scotty, and everyone else, for that matter. They're just as anxious to end this mission as I am."

"Well, drinking yourself into insensibility won't help!" McCoy stirred to remove Kirk's glass but the captain lifted it to his mouth quickly. Glowering, the doctor grabbed the tall bottle and locked it back in the drug cabinet.

"Jim, what's bothering you? You should be on shore leave, at least keeping an eye on Chekov and the rest."

"Chekov's old enough to take care of himself, Doctor," Kirk asserted almost soberly.

"Well, there's something --," McCoy towered over the chair that Kirk had slumped into as the alcohol began its inevitable course.

"Yes, there's something bothering me, Bones, and it's not Sandler or Chekov, or the Klingons." He lapsed into reverie, seeming indifferent to the worried medical officer standing over him. McCoy settled onto the corner of his desk.

"All right, Captain, let's get to the heart of the matter," he backtracked quietly. "If you are to function efficiently around here, you're going to have to level with your senior medical officer or place yourself on sick report -- that's an order, Jim," he finished gently.

Kirk straightened instinctively at the doctor's authoritative tone, glancing up in surprise at two very serious, blue eyes. Sighing disconsolently, he drained the last few drops of brandy from his glass.

"Bones, back at Space Central, do you remember that you left Nogura's office a short while before I did?"

McCoy frowned slightly, remembering.

"Well, after you left, the real negotiating started! You see, the Corona is a precious commodity -- a plum in Nogura's pie; and he was not about to let her go without a price." Kirk smiled fuzzily at McCoy, twirling the empty goblet wistfully. "I had to consider that price for a long time, very carefully. That's why it took so long to wrap up the parley -- I was gambling with my life on the line."



"Your life?" McCoy, puzzled, looked at Kirk with the same worried expression that Kirk had become so familiar with in recent months.

"My life," Kirk repeated resignedly. "I had to have the Corona, Bones. With the Enterprise out of commission for God-knows-how-long, I had to obtain a ship capable of handling the unlimited range and stress necessary to complete my mission. And you have guessed that mission, haven't you, Doctor?"

"To find Spock," McCoy added matter-of-factly.

"Exactly. I had to decide whether Spock's life was worth...my own." He paused, oblivious to McCoy's consternation until the doctor prodded him sharply, his own weariness dismissed for the moment.

"What do you mean, your life? What is it that Nogura required of you, Jim. Surely, he wouldn't --."

"A different life, Bones, that's what Nogura has in mind for me." Kirk signed again, regretfully. "But I'd give up anything in order to have Spock back safe, you know that."

"Are you telling me that Nogura asked you to give up your commission!"

"Not just my commission, Dr. McCoy, my ship. In exchange for the time and machinery capable of locating Spock, I had to promise I'd give up my captaincy in two years and accept a desk job. Of course, promotion to admiral goes along with the offer --."

"Give up your captain's stripes! Jim, I never thought -- ." The chief medical officer broke off abruptly, realization dawning painfully. Kirk was willing to give up command of the Enterprise in exchange for Spock's life.

McCoy shook himself mentally. It had been patently apparent for many years that each of the command officers of the Enterprise had been prepared to die for the other. But that had been in extenuating circumstances, in life or death situations. Kirk is that certain of Spock's survival!

"Jim, I --."

"Forget it, Bones. It was hard for me to accept at first, too. But I suddenly realized, there in Nogura's office, that I am no longer a young space jockey, able to leap tall buildings with a single bound, faster than a speeding bullet.... And if I find Spock it will have all been worth it." The flippancy had been forced; however, the sentiment was unmistakably genuine.

"But will Spock think it has been worth it?" McCoy's quiet wisdom met with a somber shake of Kirk's head.

"It's done, Bones; in two years, whether I find Spock or not, I am stepping down to a desk job."

Most crew people would agree that shore leave was usually beneficial, but shore leave on Thekur IV was downright accomodating, as Kyle put it later, all memories of a transparently wrapped beauty on Chinqek momentarily forgotten. But Kirk brushed aside descriptions of the delightful aspects of the Greylong Caboon Inn for Weary Travelers and pinned down the purpose of the visit with one well-placed frown.

"He had been there, Captain," Sulu put in hopefully. "Just as reported before: a Vulcan with two Klingons. The Vulcan was wearing casual clothing, but one of the waitresses recalled hearing the others address him as 'Commander'!"

"Commander?" Kirk paced impatiently before the four officers who were still attired in off-duty dress. Not content to worry alone on the bridge, he'd begun waiting for their return in the transporter room and had begun interrogating them even as they'd stepped off the platform.

"The other two left him there overnight," Sandler faltered uncertainly. "And returned for him early the next morning." He stared meaningfully at the captain but the others made no comment. Sulu shifted uncomfortably -- it had been a long shore leave.

"I questioned one other trader who'd just come in from quadrant three north, Captain. He'd heard rumors of a Klingon ship -- I believe he called it the Emptor -- headed into Federation territory towards Vulcan."

Kirk faced his helmsman silently, his mouth pursed in doubtful speculation. Spock...going home? They'd have to recharge engines somewhere eventually -- how could he dare detection in alien space with a contingent of Klingons?

"The trader picked up a Klingon officer, a deserter who paid for the lift by dropping the tip that the Emptor has been searching for the flagship of the Klingon fleet," the Asian officer continued. "The Aerrex is under the command of the Supreme Warrior, Kalauq, according to my alien friend." Sulu frowned hesitantly. "But what are they doing so far from home, Captain?"

His question went unanswered and the men barely heard the words, "Dismissed, gentlemen," as Kirk stood lost in thought. Sometime later he eased himself into the command chair as the Corona prepared to get underway.

"Set course for Federation Territory, Mr. Sulu, specifically, the Vulcan Zone."

"Already laid in, sir. Speed?"

"Warp ten, Mr. Sulu."

Hours stretched into days, days into weeks, and even at warp ten the vastness of space continued forward interminably. Kirk was in his cabin studying the latest tapes on the computerized probability of tracking Spock's course, wondering what the stoic Vulcan would have predicted about the odds of such a feat. His reverie was interrupted by a report from Uhura.

"Sir, I've picked up a faint signal, a message of some sort, in Klingoni. It seems to be originating from the Vulcan Zone!"

"Klingoni coming from the direction of Vulcan?" They'd been in Federation space for two days, Kirk reckoned swiftly, too far within the boundaries for it to be an accidental refraction.

"Can you have it translated, Lieutenant?"

"Working on it now, Captain." There was a pause as the leading communications officer's voice lowered significantly. "Maybe you'd better come up to the bridge, sir? Ensign Tompkins is evaluating --."

"On my way."

Tompkins was seated at the science station, green symbols flashing quickly across the small screen in front of him.

"Sir, the translator indicated the message is verbal, not in code!"

"Read it for me, Ensign," Kirk prompted tersely.

Tompkins pushed a button and the screen stabilized into English. Emptor in pursuit of Aerrex, believed headed for Tholian Space. Must continue invisibility and radio silence following this communique. Will contact you only when Aerrex is apprehended. Kodor.

"You confirmed that the transmission came from the Vulcan Zone?" Kirk rubbed his chin absently.

"Yes, sir. We contacted Vulcan Space Central and learned that a Klingon ship was suspected to have been in the area but that an unconfirmed triangulation of the transmission source indicated that the vessel was moving away, towards the very center of Federation space."

"Spock," Kirk whispered into the tense silence of the bridge, "piloting a Klingon ship through Federation territory in pursuit of the Aerrex, flagship of the Supreme Warrior of the Klingon Empire! But why towards the Tholian sector? Doesn't make any sense, does it?"

"No, sir," chorused the three communications personnel standing around Uhura's station.

"Mr. Sulu," Kirk mustered, "change course to intersect with the outer limits of Tholian space. Increase speed to warp twelve!"

The helmsman nodded startled acknowledgement and replied, "Yes, sir, warp twelve!"

Chekov glanced over his shoulder at a disappearing Kirk and as the turbo-lift doors swished shut, sighed his own postscript to Kirk's command.

"Let's just hope this 'trial run' holds together, Mr. Sulu!"



# CHAPTER 10

# VENGEANCE

Captain's Log - Stardate 2934.7: Corona progressing through Federation Space following a Klingon ship believed to be in the hands of former Commander Spock. The Emptor, which the computer denotes as cruiser class, is also designated as employing an invisibility device which accounts for her ability to enter Vulcan space more or less undetected. The Emptor also appears to be pursuing the flagship of the Supreme Warrior, Kalauq, leader of all military forces of the Klingon Empire. It has yet to be determined why both ships are headed towards the area of the galaxy inhabited by the Tholian Assembly, and I have requested that any Federation starships in the area stand by in case we require assistance.

The Corona has been fully tested in all capacities and is performing beyond expectations. The ability to sustain higher warp speeds is proving to be necessary as well as beneficial in our present endeavor.

Time stretches interminably in space. The Corona was surpassing all previously established warp speeds in her quest across the galaxy, yet the days and weeks seemed to pass even more slowly than ever for Kirk. The bridge officers came to expect his monotonous pacing from station to station, quietly nodding approval as members of the crew carried out their duties. Chekov kept him constantly updated on the ship's position as well as the identification of other starships encountered within hailing distance.

The purpose of their dash across the confines of Federation territory remained unchallenged, and Kirk offered only one intimation during the long weeks of their journey -- to the captain of the Endeavor, sister ship of the Enterprise, on patrol near the outer limits of the realm. The exchange, originating from the privacy of Kirk's quarters, had been cryptically brief.

"Paul, you old deep-space-dog, how've you been?"

"Fine, Jim, haven't seen you in a coon's age. You seem to be in a bit of a hurry."

"Hunting for a needle in a haystack, Paul. Have you heard of any unusual Klingon activities on this side of the galaxy?"

"Can't say that I have. Why?"

"Keep your eyes open, will you? I may give a yell for help. And if



you see anything out of the way, let me know immediately."

"Will do."

"Thanks, Paul...Kirk out."

A few days later the ship entered an area of ionic interference disrupting sensors and communications down to twenty percent efficiency. Kirk had again stalked a path between the science station and the command chair, refusing to leave the bridge throughout the day until McCoy finally intervened. As suspected, sleep was next to impossible, and he subsisted on coffee and catnaps for several days until an ensign's announcement broke the tension.

Coincidentally, it came just as the morning watch had changed and Kirk had, as usual, slumped wearily into his vigil in the center seat.

"We're clear, sir!" rang out the jubilant exclamation.

"Correcting course to advanced original coordinates, sir," confirmed the navigator, his fingers flying over his console. "We are leaving Federation boundaries and heading for Tholian space."

Kirk had barely relaxed when Uhura interrupted his study. "Captain -- I'm picking up transmissions of some sort, faint but definitely audible. There is an automatic distress signal, and now I'm getting something else...."

"Put it on audio, Lieutenant," came the interested response.

Automatic translator delay by the computer induced a hushed alert around the bridge until, mingled with the squeaks and groans of direct communication, the translator droned dispassionately into the disquieted curiosity of the waiting humans.

"...web closing...can you penetrate...having difficulty...sensors are diminishing...phasers useless...."

The signals wavered and the translator waited, its red light glowing uninterrupted in the silence. For a moment Kirk thought the transmission had been cut deliberately. He looked towards Uhura, his eyes reflecting an unspoken query but she shook her head helplessly. Abruptly, the translator hummed to life.

"...try reverse thrust...damage to outer shields...will divert...breaking free...setting course for...Cyrannis IV...." and the garbled whine of the open channel died to a metallic hum, the translator's light beaming steadily again like a forgotten sentinel. Uhura closed her channels reluctantly and swung around to Kirk's expectant glance.

"It seemed to be coming from two directions, sir."

"Two ships?"

"It's possible, sir. The signals weren't strong enough to get exact positions but there seemed to be considerable distance between them because one of the signals was slightly stronger than the other --."

"It sounded like a battle of some sort, sir," Sulu offered.

"I believe it was coming from directly ahead of us, sir," Uhura continued softly.

"The Tholian Assembly," Kirk mused thoughtfully.

"Maybe a Tholian web, sir, like we encountered once...." Chekov faltered, fully intimidated by the worried frown on his captain's face.

"Set course for Cyrannis IV, Mr. Sulu," Kirk ordered. "Warp thirteen."

Sulu didn't bother to acknowledge the order as he busied himself with his controls. The main viewing screen blurred and streaked as the star positions shifted to the altered course.

The Aerrex's signal had strengthened until they could determine coordinates and position exactly. Spock monitored the sensor controls himself,

his calculations complementing the computer's with efficiency. When the ship had closed to within range of video reception, the flagship appeared to be blanketed by a foreign substance which was emitted by many small ships circling the larger vessel in cocoon-like patterns. The insistent summons of the distress beam echoed across the bridge as Spock studied the scene.

"Establish ship-to-ship contact." The communications officer reacted smoothly to the quiet command, and the voice of Kalauq filled the air around them.

"...can you hear us, Kodor, the web is closing. Can you penetrate the Tholian defenses? We are having difficulty with communications and...sensors are diminishing...power down to repair engines, the phasers are useless...."

Kodor hesitated momentarily, his reluctance to rescue the Supreme Warrior contradicting his logic.

We could leave the area unnoticed and abandon the flagship to whatever fate the Tholians decree. But there would be no proof with which to return to the Council, and Klyntee's objective would become an empty threat. Without custody of the flagship and the confessions of the Supreme Warrior himself to back up our claims, the revolution would falter and die.

His indecision was short-lived. The prize was his for the taking if he could extricate the elusive Klingon from the trap.

"Fire dispersal blasts around the perimeter of activity, but take care not to hit the flagship." His order was obeyed instantly and the picture on the main screen varied with dramatic interplay. The Aerrex lay exposed, her engines dead, her shields down, with the Tholians in full retreat. The distress signal had ceased earlier with Emptor's transmission, and silence floated between the two ships. The cruiser drifted, waiting.

The Tholians made the next move. With swift precision they swung about to descend on both ships, plying the webbed snares with intricate accuracy -- and doubled numbers.

"What are your orders, sir?" The navigator stared at Spock in alarm.

"Steady, Krayling," Spock cautioned gently. "We must assist the Aerrex before attempting to leave the area. Communications Officer, open hailing frequencies to the flagship again." If we can control exit from Tholian space the Aerrex will be ours.

"Aerrex, we have you on our sensors. Suggest you try to reverse thrust as soon as possible; damage to outer shields can be repaired later. We will attempt to divert...." He motioned the weapons officer to fire blindly at the attacking Tholian shuttle ships.

A sudden puff of brilliance from the rear of one of Aerrex's propulsion pods indicated enough power had been achieved to permit maneuverability, and the voice of the Supreme Warrior filled the bridge of the Emptor once again.

"Good work, Emptor! We are breaking free. Setting course for the nearest neutral star system, Cyrannis IV...." and the final sign-off dwindled into nothing.

The web was rapidly closing and at the last possible moment, the Emptor tore through one narrowing gap. The ship promptly headed out from the center of the Tholian region, tangent to Aerrex's course, and Spock sensed the secondary officer's dismay as their movement took them off course and away from their quarry. But the Vulcan chided his officers patiently; exodus from the dangerous zone they had penetrated was of primary importance, and they would continue until the ship had safely cleared the boundaries of alien space.

At the astrogator's nod, Spock calmly gave the directive. "Plot course

to follow and monitor the flagship. Cyrannis IV is several light years distant; it will take us four weeks at warp six to reach that area provided we don't overtake the Aerrex sooner."

After days of delay skirting uncharted nebulae and Tholian outposts, the Klingon cruiser escort gathered speed to circle and home in on the flagship's path with the deadly certainty of an insect seeking its prey.

The flight of the flagship took both ships through uncharted space with sensors operating at maximum at all times. Each was aware of the other but no messages were exchanged, no verbal contact attempted. They were form and shadow, moving in tandem symmetry towards a faraway haven. Only self-preserving caution prevented the commander of the smaller cruiser from pushing engines beyond capacity -- there would be need for reserved power in order to return home with their prisoner without the delay of recharging the power units. And so the stalking continued its moderate pace.

Cyrannis IV was a randomly charted star system, its environs limited on two sides by the great barrier at the galaxy's edge. The probability of habitable planets had not been explored, chiefly because no official expedition had ever made more than a passing swing through the remote region. Considered by most to be relatively valueless as far as settlement and development were concerned, the area was occasioned only by transients and renegade outcasts who remained understandably close-mouthed about the hospitality of the millions of planetoids.

Kalauq apparently had access to such pertinent information, however; as the Emptor neared the outer fringes of the system, the flagship disappeared from all sensor screens.

"Science Officer, go to fourth magnitude pentracons and locate the Aerrex." Months before, Spock had wondered if the science officer would ever have need for the powerful new tracking equipment that had made the Emptor the most advanced detection vessel in Klingon history. Now he was silently grateful for the bulky apparatus that took up so much of the science console.

"Trying, sir...there she is!" And the officer's results flashed brightly on the main viewer in computer graphics.

Thousands of kilometers from the Emptor the Aerrex nestled in a cluster of asteroids and orbiting ice chunks, apparently comfortably unaware of the Emptor's probing discovery. Spock smiled to himself in satisfaction. This time she will not get away.

Slowing the ship to impulse velocity, the computer automatically mapped an entry into the swirling satellites. And using the exquisite sensor's guidance, the fugitive ship steered and drifted around magnetic storms and transparent whirlpools of antimatter. The Aerrex hung sequestered and motionless, turned as if to face unannounced intruders. Spock discreetly prepared the Emptor for singular confrontation, abandoning the useless invisibility screens at last.

"Raise the shields; all personnel to battle stations. Navigator, prepare and lock in an expedient course of retreat...just in case." The quiet words had an electric effect on everyone on the bridge, and in mutual accord, the ship was girded for battle.

Still half a day away, the flagship floated, her engines in neutral flux as energy units recharged, her long-range sensors quiet at all stages. The Emptor crept closer, maintaining a ragged line of pock-marked moons and planetoids between the ships. Spock briefly pondered recharging the ship's



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engines before approaching the Aerrex's superior batteries, then decided there would be sufficient time following her capture.

The last flurry of small planets disappeared from the viewscreen as the escort vessel slid into video range of the larger battleship. The communications board of the Emptor lit up simultaneously and all eyes turned instinctively towards their commanding officer.

"Full stop, Krayling. Open hailing frequency, Communications."

The Supreme Warrior appeared in benevolent humor on the main viewer. "Greetings, brother Kodor! I congratulate you on locating us in our well-conceived hiding place -- your new sensing device works well, I take it?"

"Greetings, Supreme Warrior," Spock intoned formally, his face carefully neutral. "Yes," he acknowledged drily, "the sensor will be a most effective defense against surprise attacks in the future."

"I am most grateful for your intervention against the Tholians, Commander! I'm sure we would have most likely perished without the generous help of our escort vessel. You did your job well." The swarthy, bearded Klingon beamed condescendingly while Spock gritted his teeth against tipping his hand prematurely with a retaliatory reply. Kalauq gestured to someone behind him and Spock tensed in anticipation of the other's inevitable curiosity.

"We are also very surprised to see you in this part of the galaxy, Kodor," the Klingon continued. "It was presumed that you had been assigned to stay with the fleet until further orders. However, inasmuch as you have performed admirably and spared the flagship from certain destruction, we merely wish to know why you have been following us and what you are doing here now."

The silence on the Emptor's bridge was deathly, and Spock's carefully expelled sigh punctuated the tension.

"Our mission is insurrection; our intention...to take the Aerrex in tow and restrict the Supreme Warrior with shackles."

The explosive reaction from the bridge of the Aerrex erupted loudly into the Emptor's strained composure, and Spock rose slowly to gain the center of the bridge with confident, measured tread. His subordinates watched him covertly, concentration on their duties shattered by the unfolding drama.

"Our communications must be faulty, Kodor. Can you repeat that last message?" Kalauq peered grimly from the screen, his mouth twisted into a nervous smile.

"I repeat -- sir -- insurrection is our purpose, to be confirmed with the capture of the Aerrex, and secure confinement of Kalauq, the Supreme Warrior of the Klingon Empire!"

There was no mistaking the quiet fury in Spock's voice, and the face of the other darkened with poorly suppressed frenzy.

"You are at our mercy, gentlemen," Spock addressed the staff who had gathered around Kalauq's chair in support of their leader. "Your energy units are depleted and your phasers are ineffective. There can be no resistance. Surrender peacefully and we will soon be underway back to Khaz."

"No!" thundered the Supreme Warrior, violently brushing aside most of his officers as he catapulted from his chair. "You have the audacity to challenge the authority of your superior? I'll have you arrested and thrown into chains, Kodor, and your subordinate traitors tortured before your eyes!"

"Our weapons are trained on you at this moment, Aerrex," Spock continued blandly as though the other hadn't spoken. "There can be no escape."

Kalauq stared incredulously, the bridge in back of him a riot of pande-

monium, and Spock dismissed the tentative impulse to have the Klingon and his officers beamed aboard the Emptor. It would mean lowering the shields, and despite relative certainty that the Aerrex was powerless, the Supreme Warrior's proven duplicities in the past made him doubly unpredictable. The Vulcan's caution was instantly rewarded.

"We are not so powerless as you were led to believe, Kodor," Kalauq smirked evasively. "Our phasers have been reactivated while we were talking and are trained on your shields with full intensity. We will eventually overpower you," he gloated confidently, "even though it might cost us several more days delay. Do you wish to reconsider your charges, Emptor?"

"Yes," Spock responded evenly, ignoring the gasps of consternation behind him. "I wish to offer the Supreme Warrior a challenge, one of personal strength and significant political merit. To refuse would admit to cowardice; to accept would grant the redemption of your power and authority in the eyes of your peers."

"I daresay I'll soon have no need to 'redeem' my status, Vulcan," Kalauq mocked gently. "However, I'm a reasonable commander...what is your offer, Kodor? Surely you cannot believe that I would walk into a trap of your making."

"It would be no trap, Klingon," Spock asserted boldly, the reins of control returning to him narrowly. "A duel -- one of honor and integrity -- between opposing tenets. The prize: winner takes all. I propose hand to hand combat, Kalauq," Spock finished quietly. "Do you dare refuse me?"

"A novice against a master of the art! Do you take me for a fool, Kodor?" Kalauq grinned broadly, stroking his dark beard confidently. "I have fought more duels than you will ever see, little brother. However," he sobered darkly, "I accept your challenge. And I will declare an official truce between our two fighting ships until one of us...the victor, of course," he gestured magnanimously, "returns to claim them both."

"Commander!" Kahlor hissed warningly, but Spock waved him to silence. "Winner take all, Klingon," the Vulcan agreed, the expression on his face clearly indicating there would be no further discussion. The viewscreen dimmed for a moment, then brightened to reveal Kalauq's malevolent smile.

"There is an asteroid below us with a breathable atmosphere until the neighboring sun arcs above it. My transporter officer will supply yours with the proper coordinates. I will greet you in person, Kodor, in thirty standard minutes!" And with a widening leer, Kalauq signalled the frequency closed.

Kahlor stared apprehensively at his commanding officer as the other nodded stiffly and gestured towards the bridge exit.

"Instruct Sub-Commander Kootaan to meet us in my quarters in five minutes for final orders, Kahlor."

"There will be no interference, Kootaan," Spock charged tersely at the younger Klingon's white face. Kahlor nudged his friend aside and faced his superior with a miserable shake of his head.

"Commander Kodor, you face certain death against Kalauq! You cannot trust him...and he is larger...." He lapsed into silence as the Vulcan placed a hand on each of the others' shoulders.

"I shall prevail, nevertheless," Spock promised gently. "I have had...other...training, such as Kalauq knows nothing about. Do not worry; I will return the victor." His cool reassurance seemed pitifully inadequate in the face of the Klingons' panic, and Spock attempted to coach them

briskly in regard to their own duties.

"You must keep the shields up at all times until I signal for return. Do not let anyone from the Aerrex convince you otherwise. They have no power as far as their engines are concerned, and in case I...am not able to overcome Kalauq, you must reverse course immediately as I previously directed, and make speed for free space. Return to the pirate base and plan a new strategy with Klyntee. It will be more difficult with Kalauq's knowledge of your intentions, but not impossible with convincing numbers. There are, undoubtedly, other officers in the fleet willing to come over to your side...." He could only nod weakly at their undiminished consternation before turning away quickly to change from the formality of his uniform into a loose tunic and trousers.

"At least take a small weapon with you," pleaded Kootaan softly.

Spock shook his head emphatically. "This is an affair of honor, Kootaan, one of which I do not have the time to explain. Do not be distressed," he reassured them again. "It will be a brief encounter. Be prepared for my signal."

And with that, he was gone.

The fractured transporter beams wavered and solidified within a short space of each other. Spock could see the other's eyes staring expectantly in his direction even before the transference was complete. They both stood transfixed for a moment to gain balance and bearings, then tensed for the agreed business at hand.

Spock glanced about him, sniffing and weighing the half-light around them tentatively. He wished suddenly for the tricorder and, for a fleeting instant, the back-up of one hazel-eyed human.

"Our arena is suitably hostile, Kodor," Kalauq smiled maliciously. "No more fitting for a contest between two well matched brothers, eh?" He frowned at the Vulcan's icy calm and cocked an eyebrow curiously.

Spock assumed a relaxed stance, hands hanging loosely at his sides, knees flexed comfortably in readiness of attack. He would be on guard constantly until the Klingon had been subdued, his mind refusing to consider the possibility of surrender. It would be a fight to the death and he did not intend to lose.

"There is something you should know, Kalauq, before the battle begins." Spock lifted his chin defiantly to stare coolly at his opponent. "I am no longer Kodor the Klingon, brother to the Supreme Warrior."

The other peered through the dimness nearsightedly, circling the Vulcan warily and throwing up his hands in disbelief. "You will always be Kodor the Klingon!" he bellowed brusquely, the dark face rejecting the Vulcan's words as unimportant. "You have been legally adopted by the family -- ."

"No! I am Spock of Vulcan!" The denial thundered flatly across the distance between them. "I am a commander in the Federation's Starfleet, first officer of the starship Enterprise, and I have brought you here to avenge my captain's death!"

The challenge reverberated loudly between the barren cliffs above them, and Spock stiffened proudly with the few vestiges of untrammelled self-respect left to him. The Klingon glared back indignantly, hands on his hips in pedantic arrogance.

"Who has been talking to you?" he demanded ominously. "Where have you heard such ridiculous claims? You are Kodor, brother of Kalauq of the clan -- ."

"No! You lie, Kalauq! You cannot deceive me or the others any

longer!" Spock's eyes glittered dangerously and the Klingon stepped back, dumbfounded.

A hot breeze swirled the sand that lay underfoot as a greenish sun broke the horizon. Spock shook his head angrily and tried again.

"The truth is out, Kalauq, and the subterfuge is over. I have regained my memory to the extent that I know what took place both before and after your ambush of the Enterprise." He stared grimly at the other's reaction, then thrust home with the final taunt.

"There'll be no further assistance from the Emptor, and there is insurrection on your home planet as of right now. You are finished 'Supreme Warrior'; the war is over for you. All that remains is a formal declaration of coup d'etat to the Council by the leader of the civil uprising. The rest of the fleet is undoubtedly immobilized by this time, too, and there will be no exchange of firepower. Your dreams of glory are done with!" He could only hope the bluff would work.

Kalauq seemed mesmerized by Spock's words, his face blank, his hands clenched helplessly at his sides; but his query gave no indication of surrender.

"How did you...when did the process fail? The doctors assured me that it was permanent, that nothing would interfere with my plans for you --."

"The mind transference didn't 'take', Kalauq," Spock explained shortly. "They were unable to permanently short-circuit my inborn resistance to tampering with inner brain mechanisms, and the temporary paralysis of my will and memory dissolved some time ago."

The Klingon gestured viciously in the eerie, dust-laden sunlight, the black metallic tunic rippling dully with his movements. "Then I shall remedy the doctors' miscalculations. I am accustomed to eliminating others' mistakes when they interfere with my schemes." He chuckled softly and continued stalking his fiercely determined opponent.

"Need I remind you that our duel is being monitored, Kalauq? Every word is being recorded by the Emptor's audio sensors. Your intentions are well known to us; we have been following you for some time." Spock settled into an expectant crouch, his eyes never leaving the Klingon's face.

Kalauq's eyebrows rose in mild resignation. "No matter, I shall soon be referring to you as 'my late brother', Kodor. There will be no witnesses. The Emptor will be destroyed on my order," he rallied confidently, "the moment I finish with this business. No one will question my explanation that the Aerrex escort had been infiltrated with Federation spies and had to be destroyed. Your death will be recorded as that of a hero...you died while defending the Supreme Warrior against Federation treachery on the surface of this asteroid!"

He smiled at Spock almost fondly. "I believe I shall have a monument erected in your honor -- the people will love it!"

"The people will not believe it, Kalauq," Spock returned quietly. "They know what you are now. By the time you return to Khaz, the rebellion will be in full swing and there will not be the usual welcome you've enjoyed in the past. Your power is diminishing with every breath, Klingon."

"Give up the game, Kodor," Kalauq snorted. "The Emptor cannot survive the matchless firepower of the flagship. You are merely here to engage in a friendly duel, winner takes all. And I intend to be the winner!" With one fluid movement Kalauq had unsheathed a folded, razor-honed sklieta from his boot, extending it to full length before brandishing it at the Vulcan.

Spock studied the deadly weapon curiously. Another Klingon deceit; I should have suspected as much! Then straightening cautiously, and with





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unconcealed disgust in his eyes, he countered his dismay with a mocking rebuke.

"We agreed to unarmed combat, Kalauq. Perhaps you have less faith in yourself that I'd been led to believe?" He spat out the barb scornfully, bracing for the other's frenzied lunge. But Kalauq dodged effectively before Spock's hand could find the pressure points, and the two faced each other with breathless deliberation.

"Very good, Kodor! Your training will make it that much more of a challenge for me." The Klingon circled slowly, the narrow blade of his sklieta gleaming menacingly in the growing light.

For several moments they concentrated silently on the contest, parrying and feinting expertly, shadowing each other's moves with deadly intent. Kalauq was the larger and slower of the two, while Spock padded with feline dexterity over the rough ground, studying his adversary's face for subliminal cues.

"No one will ever know how you died, Kodor," Kalauq hissed nervously, "but you and your mutineers will not escape payment for your crimes. However, in the interests of the family name, you will be exonerated, my brother."

Spock's face went dark with rage, his eyes narrowing to pinpoints of light under lowered brows. With one swift, well-calculated feint he had tripped the other and they tumbled awkwardly in the dust, heaving and straining for control of the weapon. Unexpectedly, Kalauq jabbed a solid knee in the Vulcan's stomach and rolled clear.

Both came to their feet frantically, breathing hard, warily backing off, only to charge again in a flurry of grappling arms and legs. Breaking free of the Klingon's weakening one-armed grip, Spock whirled to attack his opponent, the blood fury pounding in his ears. With the primitive battle cry of ancient heritage dredged from his liberated brain patterns, he lifted the Klingon over his head and threw him against the rocky cascade behind him.

Kalauq roared joyously, the keen-edged blade still clutched in one bloodied paw, and for a moment, confused by the exertion of battle, Spock stared disbelievingly at the dust-encrusted, grinning Klingon. With deliberate abandon, the disheveled warrior crawled and clawed to his feet to face his adversary.

"You fight well, my brother," Kalauq wheezed doggedly, "a credit to your adopted family! You were well chosen for the task --."

"I am not your brother, Kalauq!" Spock shouted contemptuously, "and the charade will soon be exposed. Your greed has been your undoing, Mighty Supreme Warrior!" The insult proved ineffective although Kalauq's face sobered cunningly, and he went on as though Spock had not spoken.

"Your sacrifice is regrettably imperative, Kodor. But posthumous veneration will provide added incentive to spur the patriotic Klingon fleet to victory. It is too bad that you will not live to enjoy the triumph: your precious Federation brought to its knees and all of Vulcan subjected to the humiliation of slavery --."

Spock leaped blindly at the other, reaching for the nerve points that would end the diatribe. But Kalauq was prepared, and with a powerful counter stroke buried his blade in Spock's midsection.

For a moment the Vulcan gasped in astonishment, his face paling with shock. As he turned to stagger away, Kalauq yanked back savagely, freeing the blade. When Spock didn't fall as expected, the Klingon glanced down curiously at the weapon to confirm the green smears on the length of it.

"You have only won the first round, Kalauq," Spock panted hoarsely,

controlling his dizziness with extreme effort.

The other had recoiled in horror and dismay, watching mutely as Spock straightened and pulled the split tunic tightly around his body. He faced Kalauq painfully, holding his belly closed with both hands while the Klingon stood silently, the deadly sklieta held loosely at his side, his face taut with fright and regret.

"Kodor, I am sorry," he pleaded softly. "Our reunion was intended to be quite different, but you constructed your own death warrant! Together we could have ruled the galaxy -- even beyond!" He gestured helplessly at the Vulcan, his expression a mixture of affability and doubt.

Spock stared at him curiously, studying the other's hesitation. The Klingon had reacted strangely to the results of his attack and Spock was uncertain as to his next move. Memory sharpened with increasing pain and the Vulcan reconnoitered recklessly.

"Klingons don't take prisoners. Why did you take me, Kalauq?" He ground out the words harshly, his legs weakening dangerously with his deteriorating condition. Soon he would be unable to control the pain or the bleeding. "The shrine, in the study at P'Yhlarra, had something to do with it, didn't it? I could sense --."

"My brother's altar?" Kalauq blinked unawares, his attention riveted on the Vulcan's face. His shoulders sagged dispiritedly from the suspended threat of Spock's retaliation, and he dropped his weapon indifferently.

"You remember the shrine? Klorr...his life...interrupted in a battle with a Federation starship. They brought back his things, but his body had been left in space among the stars he loved so well." He lapsed into reverie and Spock had to prod him again painstakingly.

"Kalauq, why did you think I could replace your brother?" He attributed the blankness in the Klingon's eyes to shortness of breath; it was becoming increasingly difficult to breathe with the rising temperature of the atmosphere. Kalauq stood quietly for a moment, the blood from a head wound running down the side of his face. Then sighing deeply, the Supreme Warrior continued.

"The night before the attack on the Enterprise I had a strange dream. My brother appeared to me saying that another form would soon have to be found to receive his rejuvenescence. He also advised me that the subject could be of alien origin. It was fortuitous that a Vulcan body was presented to me the very next day...."

"My aides believed we were using the mind sifter on you to obtain military information. Actually, I was exploring your mental and physical dimensions to determine if they were sufficient to absorb the impressions and memories of my brother's brain tapes. Analysis diagnosed your capacities as being sufficient." He paused dreamily, remembering the excitement of the confirmation, and Spock scarcely breathed for fear of breaking the other's concentration. He stared in fascination at the Klingon, watching the metamorphosis from warrior to child, all the while anticipating the odds for one fatal opportunity.

"You were reprogrammed, reborn, as a Klingon," Kalauq went on vacantly. "And I looked forward to the day that we would become masters of our fate. You were to be half-god...brother...lover.... I put all of Klorr's beliefs into the development of your mind. I nurtured your progress at the Academy...you were becoming mine! We would have been one purpose, one triumph, one body --." He frowned suddenly, recalling aborted episodes in the laboratory, and the irritation of delay. "But sometimes you resisted, were uncooperative...."

Kalauq's lips were forming more words but Spock could no longer hear

them. His head throbbed with a roaring sound that blotted out all else, his eyes -- like his opponent's -- half blind with his own released emotions. In his nightmare, he was impelled deliberately down a long, dark tunnel filled with hot winds of hate, two deranged eyes beckoning him inexorably onward.

The Klingon, oblivious to Spock's maniacal intent, was lost to his own hallucinations, and as the Vulcan's hands circled his neck, he stared back incomprehendingly, without fear.

Talshaya...merciful death for a merciless beast.... The guttural Vulcan words echoed through both minds as Spock's hands tightened gently, almost reverently, around Kalauq's throat. Still, the drama progressed, beyond the brink of dementia, each performing a role in separate tableau, until the roaring in Spock's head had stopped, his prey sagging to the ground beneath him. Justice is done!

The odyssey had ended, remnants of sanity had surfaced, and he could retreat into the memories of his past. For one brief instant he felt remorse at failing his Klingon friends, as they would have only a dead body to return to Khaz; but the recorded confrontation would be enough to satisfy the Council, the madness of the Supreme Warrior was all too evident in his last moments of life.

The battered Vulcan slumped to the dirt a short distance away from the other, his blood forming a muddy rivulet leading away from his body. The wound now bled freely, his consciousness too far gone to direct the healing forces of his crippled mind. And the last thing he remembered was the unmistakable hum of transporter beams.



## CHAPTER 11

# TRUCE

The asteroid clusters filled the screen at maximum magnification on the main viewer, and Uhura straightened at the communications console with alarm spreading across her face. She swung around to face the Officer of the Watch who was leaning back wearily in the center chair recording the last hour of speed and course modifications.

"Mr. Lascot, my sensors have picked up transmissions between two or more Klingon vessels in the center of those clusters ahead...out of visual...."

"Engines full reverse!" Lascot yelled at the startled helmsman. "Hold at this distance and maintain position until further orders. Captain Kirk, to the bridge, please!" He punched buttons rapidly on the arm of the chair as the ship groaned under full reverse thrust. "Raise shields," he instructed tersely. "All personnel to battle stations on yellow alert. Mr. Scott, stand by for full power to the phasers and the warp drive."

The orders lashed over the ship's intercom as Kirk rolled out of his bunk to pull on uniform and boots hurriedly, and seconds later he was at a dead run towards the turbo-lift.

The Deltan lieutenant on watch at the science station nodded his confirmation as Kirk burst onto the bridge.

"I'm picking up trace readings of Klingon vessels in stationary...."

"Thank you, Mr. Ippeli," Kirk murmured politely, and motioning impatiently to the Duty Officer, dismissed him from the command chair. "Ahead sublight slow, Helm. Prepare for full stop on my order."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Mr. Ippeli, as soon as possible I want exact positions of Klingon vessels in the area, number and size." Out of the corner of his eye Kirk noted the lieutenant's snap to attention. "I want to know what's going on before we get too close."

"Yes, sir!" The Deltan swiveled to crouch over his instruments in earnest, fingers deftly manipulating the controls.

Glancing quickly around the bridge to affirm attendance at every station, Kirk leaned forward to study the main viewscreen. Rock-faced asteroids slipped past in eerie succession as the ship moved more slowly through the narrow channels of safety prescribed by the computer. Would this be the final gesture in their search for Spock? The Klingon vessels were quite possibly the flagship and her escort, the chase having taken them to the

limits of the galaxy. If it proved to be otherwise he would have no alternative but to retrace their journey to Federation space back towards Earth. Starfleet would be unlikely to grant Kirk any additional time and personnel to pursue mere rumors or speculation. Three years of tracing clues, questioning eye-witnesses, following intuition and just plain hunches would soon become obviously repetitious to Starfleet Command, and Nogura would extract his pound of flesh. Kirk would be unable to justify further probes despite his conviction that Spock was still alive. The intercepted transmission from a passing Orion trading vessel that the Emptor had indeed been sighted in this vicinity might very possibly be the last turn of the cards.

Leaks from Federation Intelligence sources had been impossible to contain, and the speculation over Spock's whereabouts had dominated space scuttlebutt throughout Federation environs, leading to candid as well as humorous observations. Any other officer would have been chalked up as just another casualty, his absence simply added impersonally to deep space fatalities. But the unorthodox disappearance had caused much deliberation because of the loose ends.. Subsequently, multiple investigations had stretched from all edges of the Federation into neighboring alien domains as well.

The lack of witnesses hampered inquiry. Traces of Vulcan blood indicated that he'd apparently been injured in the battle, and bridge survivors testified later that he had been observed tending his science station just prior to the tremendous pounding directed at the bridge.

The entire level had been isolated when the first of many phaser blasts jammed turbo-lift and hatch controls. A few missing crewpeople had been known to have been sucked out through holes in the exterior elsewhere in the ship; but the bridge had remained intact unconditionally, excluding that explanation.

By the time rescuers had managed to blast an access opening to the bridge Spock was gone, and no trace of him could be found on the ship. Unfortunately, Kirk and the rest of the bridge personnel had been knocked unconscious during the attack and were unable to relate the peculiar circumstances of the Vulcan's removal.

The inevitable assumption had been that the Klingons wanted Spock. And Federation hierarchy being relatively unfamiliar with Klingon reasoning, could only surmise that he had been kidnapped as an obvious source of information. However, Spock had never had deliberate occasion to acquire sensitive material. Granted, his knowledge of Federation military secrets had gone unquestioned over and above that automatically programmed into the Enterprise data banks. The Defense Department deemed it necessary for staff officers of explorer craft such as the Enterprise to be aware of certain top-secret military defense procedures. But details had never been available randomly to line officers. That delicately pertinent material was code-locked into an emergency sequence activated only by designated voice prints fed into each starship computer. That would, in turn, key an interlinking channel to the main computer at Starfleet Defense Headquarters on Earth. If the Klingons hoped to glean "eyes-only" classified information from the hapless Vulcan, they would be quickly disappointed.

In the meantime, Kirk reflected bitterly, what would Spock have to endure before they discovered that fact? The human was lost to the horrifying aspects of Klingon torture as he reviewed the dilemma once more. He knew Spock was able to resist certain interrogative methods that would kill an ordinary human being, but how far would the Klingons have gone to extract from him what they considered to be important data? Eventually Spock would have succumbed -- even a full Vulcan could not hold out permanently

against extreme torture; Vulcan intelligence officers had confirmed that suspicion early in the game. And if Spock had not survived....

Although it had been almost three years since he'd vanished, periodic reports of a Vulcan in a Klingon warrior's uniform accompanying other Klingon officers had drifted in from remote trading posts and vessels traveling in and around the Klingon Empire. As a result, hope fluctuated slightly above or below salient levels among dedicated investigators.

Then news from alien informers began to dwindle and finally halted completely as rumors of trouble in the Klingon hierarchy spread into nearby regions. After that it had been impossible to confirm the gossip of disinterested merchants. Moreover, the frequency of Klingon raids near Federation boundaries increased, suggesting intensifying levels of unrest among the warlike aliens and leading to the opinion that an all-out military offensive might be in the offing. To some less than optimistic observers in Federation War Department circles such conclusions served only to verify disparaging theories concerning one missing Vulcan.

Kirk's attention returned to the bridge abruptly at the young science officer's exclamation.

"I have it now, Captain! The vessels are of battleship classification, the larger one probably the flagship judging from the engine capacity and firepower. The other is an escort ship which also carries formidable armament, unusually heavy for one of its size."

Kirk stiffened. The Supreme Warrior himself? Starfleet information described the Klingon as highly volatile and undoubtedly surrounded with fanatical subordinates pledged to loyalty to the death; Federation starship commanders had been cautioned not to confront the powerful alien without back-up support.

Nevertheless, what was an important figure of Klingon military leadership doing out here virtually on the edge of nowhere? The sensors read two ships only; had the Emptor trapped its quarry because there had been no place else to flee? Why had they exposed themselves to the possibility of capture so far from home? With diplomatic relations in the galaxy stretched to the breaking point, why would the strong man of the Klingon Empire have come alone to this remote point in the galaxy? Was he aware that the escort ship had been tracking him across space?

Kirk frowned in frustration. So far two plus two hadn't added up to much of anything. There should have been a convoy of supporting cruisers -- and why had Spock followed from such an untenable distance? Had the purpose been protection both ships would have travelled similar routes. Perhaps we have stumbled onto a top secret Klingon rendezvous --

"Sir! The computer is unable to obtain a detailed picture of the other side of the asteroid due to unusually heavy magnetic distortions affecting the sensor probes. However, I'm getting humanoid tracer readings." The Deltan officer raised his head slowly to stare in Kirk's direction. "Human/Vulcan readings, Captain," he declared quietly.

Spock! We've finally found him!

Kirk slid from his chair paralytically, all eyes around the bridge on him with tense expectation as he snapped briskly to the science officer, "Confirm that, Mister!"

Ippeli attacked the buttons on his console with cool efficiency, resetting scans and opening the audio channel to allow the read-out to be heard clear to the engineering station.

HUMANOIDS ONE KLINGON 2.0 METERS 95 KILOS HEMEOSTASIS  
HEMOGLOBIN-HEMOGLYCITES COMPOUND HOMO-SANGTARPE TPR 103-65-20  
COMMAND INSIGNIA

"Kalaug?" Kirk whispered speculatively. The computer continued, oblivious to the brief human interruption.

ONE VULCAN-HUMANOID 1.855 METERS 80 KILOS HEMEOSTASIS  
HEMOCIANIS-HEMOGLOBIN COMPOUND HOMO-IRIDANI TPR 93/250/65  
WARRIOR CLASSIFICATION....

"It has to be Mr. Spock, sir," the science officer concurred aloud over the remaining mechanical recitation. "Vulcan traders never travel this part of the galaxy!"

Kirk nodded, rubbing his chin nervously, suddenly mindful of the dangerous course of the Corona. He turned to Uhura pensively. "Do you think they're aware of us, Lieutenant?"

"Negative, sir. The messages coming back through the translator give no indication that they know we're here. They seem to be," she paused, listening attentively, "arguing about...who is going to...win?" She looked back at Kirk in perplexity, her soft, dark eyes bright with concern, her fingers adjusting the earpiece expertly as she spoke. "There is mention of...Kalaug and another...Kodor is what I get. They are apparently engaged in hand-to-hand combat on the asteroid, sir!"

"Damn!" Kirk pounded his fist on the rail in frustration. "If only we could see what is going on. If that is Spock down there, what is he doing fighting Kalaug?"

"Captain," Uhura interrupted him animatedly, her hands flying over her console with swift flourishes. "The fight is over -- Kalaug has lost -- and the ships are squaring off to attack each other -- ." Her last words of warning were lost in Kirk's bark at the helm.

"Full impulse power! Close on those ships and prepare to fire on my orders!" He'd moved to crouch behind the helmsman, gripping the back of the lieutenant's chair with white-knuckled urgency. "If we're lucky they'll be so absorbed in their own problems, they won't notice us...."

The Corona slipped smoothly into the field of asteroids and the two Klingon ships materialized on the screen like squatting reptiles circling each other for the kill. The larger one moved clumsily, maneuvering widely and with greater deliberation than the other smaller, faster ship. The first multiple phaser blasts from the cruiser caught the flagship unawares, its starboard shields weakened immediately, and Kirk could imagine the confusion on that bridge: the shouting orders and frantic subordinates. Even before the cumbersome bulk of the Aerrex could assume port position to return fire, the Emptor blazed again with continuous pinpoint laser beams punctuated by exploding bursts from the rear torpedo batteries. The flagship tilted crazily as the combined energy bolts caught her amidships, the already damaged shields blown away completely.

"She's done for, sir," the helmsman declared quietly. "The smaller ship is closing in for the kill."

The Corona was within hailing distance now and Kirk marveled that their appearance still went undetected. He threw a terse order over his shoulder at Uhura. "Ship-to-ship, Lieutenant. I want to talk to that cruiser commander directly."

The Emptor had stopped firing, hovering uncertainly as to the next move. The crippled flagship had canted over helplessly, bridge lights darkened, its impulse trajectory bearing it away at a leisurely pace.

"I have the commander of the smaller ship ready on visual, Captain." Uhura poised expectantly, anticipating the order to switch from the resolved



battle scene to the Klingon bridge. Kirk's nod was almost involuntary and she obliged instantly, the picture dimming to the interior of the other ship.

"To unidentified Klingon ship: this is the USS Corona requesting conference with your commander."

Startled Klingon faces turned towards the humans, and the one in the center seat turned to frown a question at his communications officer. Then satisfied as to the intruder's identification he smiled broadly, and Kirk was surprised to note that the alien was much younger than he'd expected. The metallic voice of the translator hummed sharply as Klingon lips moved.

"Welcome to our arena of victory, Earth Ship! We salute you for your daring approach -- we were not aware of any Federation vessels in the area. What is the nature of your business?"

Kirk bowed slightly in response, his face cautiously composed in a facade of friendship. "Congratulations are in order, I believe? Is that the flagship Aerrex limping away, the same one commanded by your Supreme Warrior, Kalauq?"

The Klingon officer returned the bow solemnly, his dark eyes widening in astonishment. "You are familiar with our Supreme Warrior, Earth Commander? We have not been informed of your interest in us!"

"We have our...informants, Commander," Kirk injected drily. "We also have reason to believe that one of our people is down on that asteroid," he added boldly. "Can you confirm that?"

The other stared back blankly for a moment, then signalled to an aide nearby. Kirk concluded bleakly that it was a pre-arranged warning to a weapons officer and, deliberately, the human duplicated the gesture. The ruse worked; and Kirk wondered briefly how qualified an opponent the alien would prove to be. Tossing caution aside he decided to make his bid before the situation escalated into hostility beyond recall.

"We do not wish to engage in combat with you, Commander, only to search for a missing Federation starship officer who was last reported to be in this vicinity." Then he ventured smoothly, "I have a landing party standing by to beam down to search for him, but if we find nothing of interest we will return to our ship immediately and leave the area."

Kirk studied the other apprehensively, wondering if the gamble would end in deadlock. His fingers twitched with impatience and he mentally prepared the order for full shielding and phasers armed for firing. Spock could already be dead for all they knew, and he fidgeted uneasily as the Klingon conferred with a subordinate. If Spock were down on that barren rock in dire need of medical attention....

His concentration was so intent on his own misgivings that he started in alarm when the other commander threw up his hands and nodded agreement. And the pounding in Kirk's ears nearly drowned out the Klingon's words.

"You appear to be trustworthy, Earthier, and since there is nothing to be gained in fighting you we accept your terms. However, I must warn you that our weapons are trained on your ship with the certainty of its destruction in the event that we detect any deceit on the part of your men." He paused to stare across the kilometers that separated both ships and Kirk thought he detected a momentary sadness in the dark face. "As for the claim that one of the combatants below is of Federation origin, we acknowledge your allegation and will allow you one half-hour of your standard time periods known as hours to investigate. We shall, in turn, reclaim the Supreme Warrior aboard this ship."

Kirk's eyes narrowed warily as he left the command chair. It had been too easy. Why had the Klingon escort vessel driven off the flagship as if

they were only interested in rescuing Kalauq? Something wasn't making sense, and he pressed the emergency code for a team to assemble in the transporter chamber, realizing that the team must locate Spock's body quickly and beam back before they became involved in Klingon subterfuge. He straightened deliberately, feeling the tension in his shoulders sharpen as he motioned Scott to take command. Almost as an afterthought he directed a parting remark at the alien face staring back from the viewscreen.

"Very well, Commander, we will notify you if we find our man, and you may beam down to pick up your hero." He bowed quickly and swung towards communications, signalling Uhura to close transmission; but the Klingon's word caught him in mid-stride as he headed for the turbo-lift.

"On the contrary, Captain; you will be retrieving our hero...." And the screen faded and blackened as transmission was broken.

"Phasers on full stun, gentlemen -- we don't know what we'll find down there." Kirk's tense order brought grim responses from the rest. The threat of a trap hung over the sound of clicking snaps and weapons adjustments as each armed man stepped onto the transporter platform. When all were in position Kirk took the last vacant spot and nodded to the transporter technician. "Energize...."

Materialization completed, the contingent of security men formed a circle, scanning the terrain for danger and signs of the two combatants. Kirk took in the oddly moist rock formations emitting oxygenated clouds of vapor that permitted them to move about freely without life support tanks, wondering at the same time how Spock and the Klingon could have survived long enough in the heavy air to end their duel. Breathing was difficult even with the boost of adrenalin McCoy had shot into them just moments before, and Kirk suspected that the Klingon, possessing the more rapid metabolism of the three races, might have had more difficulty with respiration.

There were no sounds other than the soft footsteps of the security men as they carefully fanned out to explore more of the murky surface. Kirk swiveled slowly to scan the horizon for movement but saw nothing. The computer had supposedly set them down in the right coordinates, but maybe it had been a trick to get them away from the Corona after all. Even sensor probes were not infallible....

A shout from one of the men broke his concentration and he turned quickly in the direction of the sound, drawing his weapon instinctively against the unknown. But the crewman was bending over something on the ground and as Kirk reached the spot he could see two figures, apparently unconscious, lying within several meters of each other. For a moment he almost didn't recognize Spock, the dark clothing and longer hair rendering the Vulcan slightly sinister, and in his hesitation he also overlooked the deeply scarred face which was liberally camouflaged with dirt and blood.

He nodded gravely, and almost instantly a security-medical appeared with a transfusion pack of Vulcan serum. Boldly, Kirk stalked over to cursorily examine the other body. Spock must have gotten in a few good licks judging from the condition of his opponent! And if this is...was...the Supreme Warrior!

The Klingon's face was dark and swollen, the grotesque angle of the neck verifying the violence of the struggle. Another of the medical technicians knelt beside the alien and frowned, shaking his head doubtfully.

"I think this one is dead, sir. His neck appears to be broken, and I can't find any traces of heartbeat or respirations. Of course, the Klingon circulatory system is considerably different from ours --."

Kirk waved him aside and bent over the alien to check for himself. The face was blackening even as he watched, and there was no indication of life. "Evans," he called to the communications crewman. "Signal the Klingon ship and report that we've found them. Give their commander the coordinates to come down to remove their man but don't mention that he may already be dead."

Kirk shook his head at the medic and turned back to the Vulcan. He eased down to the ground and took his former first officer's hand in his own, acknowledging the skin warmth optimistically. He shrugged off the nagging apprehension that had followed him down to the asteroid, willing himself to believe that this was going to be one of his better days -- just about as good as the day he'd stirred from a world of darkness to greet McCoy, alive and well.

The rescue team had been standing by in the transporter room and took form on the surface almost before Evans had finished calling the ship. Spock was swiftly bundled into a travelling gurney and dematerialized within seconds. McCoy answered Kirk's inquiry just moments later.

"He'll make it, Jim. He took a terrific beating and lost a lot of blood, but I think I can patch him together again with a little help."

Kirk grinned weakly at McCoy's reassuring report. Apparently Spock's luck had held one more time, and although the doctor would more than likely earn his pay this time, the initial reaction had been one of confidence mixed with relief. For a minute Kirk nearly felt a sense of homecoming until he remembered that the ship waiting above was not the Enterprise but a newer, more powerful ship than the one he and Spock had known for so many years.

He watched warily as the Klingons retrieved their dead warrior, tensing apprehensively at several covert glances despite the temporary truce. Beaming back to the ship seemed to take forever, and he welcomed the sight of Scott's worried face as well as the announcement that the Klingon ship had already turned and headed away. He steadied himself for a moment before addressing the watchful engineer.

"Secure the transporter, Mr. Scott, and as soon as we've cleared the asteroid field take her out at warp eight -- we're going home!"

## CHAPTER 12

# FATAL DECISION

In Sick Bay the two men stared anxiously at the Vulcan sprawled limply on the diagnostic bed. He appeared more alien that they'd remembered, the badly scarred savage visage unfathomable in his unconsciousness; and hesitantly, Kirk breathed an uneasy doubt.

"It is Spock, isn't it, Bones?"

McCoy nodded grimly, raising the deformed hand in both of his to study the bent and scarred fingers.

"Yes, Jim, it's Spock all right! But what kind of hell has he been through? Look at his face and hands -- simple surgical procedures could have restored him to normal. But what I'm really worried about," he murmured darkly, "is the possibility of internal damages that went untreated. Even Spock's healing trances couldn't have repaired injured vital organs. Where do you suppose he's been to have reduced him to such a state? It's no wonder he blended in with the Klingons so well -- he looks like the devil himself!"

Indeed, both men reflected silently, this one-of-a-kind-hybrid-alien being seemed as barbarously remote as the asteroid where they'd found him. Still, it was unmistakably Spock; even the broken nose could not change the rest of the strong features that Kirk and McCoy knew so well.

"Can you help him, Bones? Can the damages be repaired?"

"I don't know, Jim. We'll have to find out more about what happened first. And he still has to come out of this coma before we can start on anything else."

Round-the-clock observation of the Vulcan continued as the Corona sped towards Federation territory. Medical personnel were instructed that McCoy was on call day and night, to be summoned at the slightest indication of the patient's return to consciousness. Kirk was in the chief surgeon's office when the signal finally came, and both of them hurried to the adjacent treatment room where Spock had been in isolation since his rescue.

McCoy ran the scanner over the inert body looking for signs of response. And almost as if on cue the life support indicators over the bed began to rise perceptibly, the heartbeat monitor increasing its steady rhythm with encouraging rapidity.



"He's coming to, Jim. Readings are almost normal, although in light of his recent beating I doubt that he will feel normal for quite some time."

A relieved McCoy signalled the nurse for an air-hypo and adjusting it to the proper dosage, applied it gently to Spock's shoulder. The stimulant would take a few moments to work and he busied himself checking the freshly bandaged abdominal wound for signs of healing. Kirk fidgeted at the foot of the bed, his face tight with concern.

"I'd like to stick around, Bones, if it's all right?"

"Sure, Captain, as long as you don't disturb the patient." He grinned ruefully at the flimsy attempt at humor, then sobered into a worried frown.

"Come on, Spock, time to wake up and greet your friendly old family doctor; you've had enough sleep and we'd like to find out how you got yourself into such a fix. Picking fights with Klingons can be dangerous to your health, you know!"

Eyelids fluttered finally, the wide mouth compressing painfully as reality returned to Vulcan nerves. The dark eyes opened and despite the difficulty of discolored swelling around each of them, focused blankly on the ceiling before shifting slowly to the level of the breathless humans. Bruised lips moved and both officers bent close to hear the hoarse words.

"Sick Bay? The Enterprise? Wha...McCoy, is that you? Jim! You're alive! Why am I here...why...." Pain interrupted at last and the puffy lids slid over rapidly glazing pupils as McCoy clumsily readjusted the air-hypo, his own sight blurred with the hot sting of tears.

Kirk gasped thickly at the fading Vulcan. "Spock! It's not the Enterprise, but we are going home! And you're going to be all right. We found you...with Kalauq. The Klingon is dead but you're -- ." An unexpected convulsion shuddered through the Vulcan's body and both humans moved swiftly to hold him down on the bed.

"Don't try to get up!" Kirk shouted in alarm. "Bones, what's wrong with him? Can't you do something to calm him down?"

McCoy was too busy securing body straps over his patient to reply immediately, but his face tightened with concern.

"I don't know, Jim. I'll have to do more tests; it may be just a psychological reaction to seeing us. He probably thought we were just as dead as we thought -- ," he broke off raggedly as the trembling stopped and Spock slumped into unconsciousness again. In frustration McCoy punched the intercom savagely. "Da'hams, Dolenski! Report to Sick Bay on the double and bring your Vulcan serology kits with you!" Turning back helplessly to Kirk he motioned the captain back to his office.

They met again twelve hours later.

"We'll have to take it one day at a time, Jim," McCoy sighed. "Spock is in worse shape than I thought and until I get the long-range results of some new tests, I won't have anything to go on -- unless, of course, he regains consciousness in the meantime and tells me what's wrong. However, that seems highly unlikely," he added, frowning at his hands in bitter resignation. "And in his present condition even that might not be too reliable. I also have the feeling that a Vulcan healer would be useless at this point." He threw up his hands defensively at Kirk's expression.

"But I sent for one anyway. And a psychiatrist specializing in Vulcan psychopathology is coming from Starbase 3 in case we need him." McCoy smiled ruefully. "You didn't think I was gonna tackle Spock's problems on my own, did you?"

Kirk smiled weakly and shook his head at his chief medical officer. "I should have known I could count on you, Bones. I just --."

"I know, Jim, I'm worried about him too, you know. Despite my past behavior, I felt pretty lost when I thought we'd never see that pointy-eared sobersides again. You may not believe this," McCoy leaned back in his chair dolefully, "but I regard him as one of the most intelligent, trustworthy friends I've ever had!" He closed his eyes wearily.

"It's been a long day, Captain! I suggest we both get some shut-eye. I have to stay here to review those beta-corta serum tests, but I want you to turn in for a full eight hours...well, four hours at least," he amended at Kirk's objection. "Doctor's orders, Jim," he finished softly. And he listened dully as Kirk tiptoed out.

The next few weeks spelled subdued activity around Sick Bay as visitors and medical personnel passed by Spock's bed quietly. He slept on, oblivious to their presence. The Vulcan healer who had been plucked from an outlying experimental station spent many unproductive hours with the patient, reporting only limited eye movement and minimum respirations. And the Federation specialist who had beamed aboard from an express starbase transport forty-eight hours later indicated only impatience at his inability to provide assistance.

Occasionally Spock would murmur an incomprehensible word, causing his life support indicators to fluctuate ominously, resulting in periods of intermittent panic during every watch. McCoy occupied the other bed in the treatment room in order to be constantly aware of his patient's condition, and during the many nights that followed he wished fervently for M'Benga's cheerful acceptance of alien idiosyncracies had always bolstered McCoy's spirits whenever Spock had needed critical attention in the past, whereas the highly emotional Andorian did nothing to inspire confidence where Vulcans were concerned. Subsequently, McCoy had excused the chief medical assistant from Spock's case altogether as tactfully as possible.

Kirk visited Sick Bay daily and frequently inquired from the bridge during duty as to Spock's progress. McCoy could only repeat the same tired phrase: "...no change, Jim; I'll let you know...."

The Vulcan healer drifted in and out of Spock's room shaking his head enigmatically at McCoy. The psychopathologist finally shrugged his shoulders helplessly and asked to be returned to his starbase clinic -- his subjects had to be conscious to benefit from his care. All attempts to reach the comatose Vulcan ebbed to a standstill and McCoy fought down an air of despair daily. A dismal, stilted conference with the elderly healer, who'd confessed an inability to descend deep enough into Spock's mind to pull him back, left the chief surgeon to ponder the absence of alternatives. Several days later Stovhen, the healer, left on a Vulcan shuttle for his home planet. His last analysis had given McCoy no hope for recovery: Spock had suffered such torment, experienced such horror that he had retreated forever into the comforting depths of oblivion.

The Chief Medical Officer rarely left Sick Bay after that, preferring to remain near the barely surviving former first officer as long as the life support indicators revealed the slightest suggestion of brain activity. There was no denying that Spock was clinging to life, fragile splinter though it was -- the spark was still there, waiting.

Visitors became fewer and Chapel seemed to draw more into herself than she ever had before. A somber Kirk rallied between hope and despair as McCoy searched frantically for a clue to the Vulcan's fading existence.

Ultimately, the doctor was forced to face facts. There was no known medical technique capable of returning the Vulcan to the living world. It was beyond anyone's expectations now, and there was virtually nothing left but to assign Spock to eternal peace.

#### UNSPOKEN PRAYER

What lies beyond tomorrow?  
Does anyone agree?  
A brave new world  
Of light and love,  
A better life for thee and me?

What tendency towards guilt  
Will dignify your death?  
Should steadfast loyalty  
Remain unchanged  
With every ebbing breath?

Return, my alien brother,  
Give back the empty debt;  
We'll span the galaxy  
Together,  
Comrades,  
Confederate.

--Trepalium 5783  
Tome of the Unsung Dead

## CHAPTER 13

# THE VIGIL

"Sick Bay to Captain Kirk." The summons echoed insistently across the intercom to be dutifully acknowledged by the solemn figure in the center seat.

"Kirk here."

"Captain, I would appreciate it if you could come down to Sick Bay after the watch changes."

"I'll be there right away," Kirk murmured into the arm of his chair. "Mr. Scott," he turned apologetically towards the engineer's bridge station. "Take over the con, please. I'll be in Sick Bay."

"Aye, Captain," the Scotsman nodded gravely, concern shadowing the engineer's eyes as he walked quickly to the con. Kirk relinquished the command chair and stepped towards the turbo-lift, a premonition of dread trailing his exit. Moments later he faced a grim McCoy.

The surgeon shook his head dispiritedly at the man with the worried hazel eyes and in the subdued lighting of Sick Bay he delivered a harsh, final diagnosis.

"He's dying, Jim, and there's nothing I can do to prevent it."

The quiet words diminished into silence as Kirk's shoulders slumped in dismay.

"Bones, there must be something -- ." The plea faltered at the regret in the doctor's eyes.

"Before Stovhen left he told me that he thought Spock had lost the desire to live, that he just couldn't face the painful memories of the past three years."

Kirk seemed to wilt into the chair near the bed while McCoy could only shrug helplessly, wiping his eyes with wearied defeat.

"Without the patient's help there is no alternative, Captain. The psyche has a great deal to do with the difference between life and death; scientists discovered that fact long ago. And the truth of the matter is that Spock just doesn't want to live!"

"But he revived once; why can't you do something to make it happen again? You've all the latest equipment, the best assistants -- if you can't help him, then get someone who can!"

McCoy recoiled inwardly at the stinging slur, but his innate professional



training discounted it. Kirk had been under tremendous strain since the beginning of the mission and had all but given up hope of finding Spock until a short time ago. Now it seemed as if all his dedication had been for nothing. The chief medical officer responded to Kirk's heedless barb patiently.

"I could keep him alive indefinitely this way, Captain, hooked to a respirator, fed intravenously with nutrients and stimulants to keep the major organs functioning. So far that has done nothing except to maintain body fluid levels and heart/lung action. However, during the past few days his brain patterns have diminished steadily to a barely readable level. This morning there wasn't even a tremor on that damned machine...."

The silent monitor gleamed back at them from the other side of the bed, an ironic reminder of the frail thread of life that had persisted within the body of their friend since its recovery. McCoy swallowed painfully and his eyes, dulled with resignation and lack of sleep, lifted to Kirk's accusatory gaze.

"We did all we could, but it just wasn't enough. And for the past week nothing we've done has had any effect. It's only a matter of time now, and I thought you should know."

Kirk's unhappy nod did nothing to assuage the other's guilt, and each man withdrew from the other in stiff-lipped reproach.

The captain's sigh punctuated the hopelessness in the room. "I'd...like to stay with him a little longer, Bones. Please call Mr. Scott and ask him to cover for me until I relieve him." He rose to stand bleakly over the silent form on the bed. "And close the door behind you, please?"

McCoy hesitated for just an instant, then nodded mutely as he stepped towards the open doorway. As the sliding doors swooshed shut Kirk swung his chair closer to the bed and adjusted the latter to his own level. For a moment he gazed numbly at his former first officer, leaning forward to trace the scarred face gently with trembling fingers. He stared hopefully at the motionless eyelids, subconsciously willing them to open in surprise to send the slanted brows with customary feathered precision towards the ragged bangs. But the pale face remained unchanged; and with a deep sob the human bowed despondently over the motionless form as the sterile silence of the lonely room settled about them.

McCoy stood preoccupied for a moment in the gloom of his quarters before touching the light switch. He would give Kirk all the time he needed until it was over. His orders to the duty officer had been briefly explicit: no one would be allowed into Treatment Room One until the captain emerged or until McCoy issued a countermanding order. And without further remarks, the bone-weary physician had retreated across the hall into his rooms.

Pausing only to remove his boots, he crawled into the long-unused bed gratefully, flexing his tense muscles painfully until he could ease his length into a semblance of relaxation. There would probably be time for a short nap, he reasoned, before he'd have to start the autopsy -- he wouldn't even allow his assistant to do that inasmuch as M'Benga was no longer available to perform medical duties on the ship. But his eyes refused to cooperate, blinking open to wander across the dark ceiling in unhappy vigilance.

He debated rising to get a sleeping draught -- even a glass of brandy would help -- then reminded himself that Kirk might need him. Resisting the impulse to catch up on abandoned medical bulletins, the distraught medical officer flung an arm across his face and attempted to conjure up soothing visions of happier times. Memories of shore leaves on Earth with his daughter, diplomatic conventions on Babel, medical seminars on Vulcan....





LAVENNA KAY  
KID 8/84



The recollections came back unbidden, the funny ones, the serious ones and the desperate ones. Kirk lost on a distant asteroid with his first officer studying the strange obelisk on the viewscreen in his quarters for weeks; Kirk trapped in a transporter beam to another dimension with the science officer computing interphase frantically while estimating the limits of an enveloping alien web; Kirk stymied by the insidious jeopardy of an invading creature that had destroyed star systems with an enslaving madness, a madness that had infected the captain's brother's family as well as the intrepid Spock, inflicting such pain that even Vulcan self-control trembled precariously at the edge of annihilation. The adventures seemed as yesterday to McCoy. And most of all, he remembered the gentleness that had surfaced with one small tribble.

Whenever the human had been in trouble the Vulcan had been there, sustaining his captain and crew with a dedicated expertise that sometimes bordered on the miraculous. And his laconic response to gratitude had always been consistently modest. Spock had rescued all of them at one time or another, but his loyalty was undeniably to Kirk. And over the years McCoy had watched the relationship between the two grow beyond the simple stages of friendship. They had become more than members of the Enterprise family; their closeness had allied them against the loneliness of commanding a starship. He understood the paradox of imposed solitude only too well, having chosen a path to the stars himself in order to escape the painful aftermath of a shattered marriage.

Openly he'd watched the development of affinity between the captain and his alien first officer into an exchange of dependency and dominance that had, on occasion, spilled over to include their chief medical officer. He'd never totally admitted to the secret jealousy he'd harbored at one time or another, but that would soon be over. And he castigated himself savagely for his past intrusions into their quiet world of decisions and authority. Kirk would presently be alone, lost to the demanding responsibility that had been shared freely with another for so many years. McCoy shivered at the thought of filling the empty spot, and lowering his defenses at last to the respite of tears conceded that no one would ever be able to replace Spock.

The tears escaped unnoticed, the sheet between his face and the Vulcan's chest blotting the spreading moisture efficiently for several minutes. He had to lift his head finally to blow his nose, and when he dabbed at his eyes a second time, realized that all the tubes were absent from the arm and leg nearest the monitor. Spock had been completely severed from life support! McCoy had already made the last conclusive medical decision.

But the finality of it caught in Kirk's throat, squeezing the breath from his chest in an agonized denial.

"No! You can't die...Spock!" The agonized human sank to his knees near the bed, his hands clasped tightly in fervent supplication.

"You mustn't take him now...not yet...I have searched for him so long...and there is so much yet to be said...I need him!" The prayer ended with a broken gasp as the bright-haired human wept gently in the sound-proofed hospital room. Was it a malignant dream, contrived by all of the evil forces in the universe, a singular plot to divorce him forever from his alien brother? Kirk rose to his feet to pace the room, anger mingling with tremulous prayer.

A cold chill permeated the room and he shuddered in sudden fear. Death swirled around him darkly and he was lost momentarily in its depths,



a blank terror enveloping him insistently, commanding him to yield to its power.

He floated, timeless; there was a warmth nearby that brushed against him briefly, questioning. He could not call out, there was no sound in him, he was frozen against the black planes of nowhere, his eyes straining to see, his ears ringing with panic. It was a nightmare; leaden limbs were struggling to move; from somewhere within the smothering darkness he felt a gentle push, then he was on his knees, in Treatment Room One, the end of his prayer still tumbling from his lips.

"Spock, we're going home....hang on....please don't go...."

Eventually, despair lapsed into emotional exhaustion, and Kirk's pleas subsided into numbing grief coupled with the dull ache of resignation. Was it only an eternity ago he'd felt the first impact of loss? How many hundreds of silent prayers had he sent off to an ambivalent deity? How much uncounted time would it take to excise the anguish of bereavement?

He had subsisted on hope for months, grasping each clue with renewed vigor. The search had been an exasperating game of hide and seek among the stars with dangerous patterns of lurking Klingons and galactic storms merging with unending disappointment. Even back on Earth he had encountered hostile opposition shadowed with elements of treason. But he'd persisted, discounting the traitorous charge even more vehemently when a major conflict failed to materialize.

The tears had dried, the pain in his heart dulled to a heavy sorrow, and Kirk glanced over at the Vulcan's body reluctantly, moving closer to absently smooth the disheveled hair. He could do nothing more for his friend, yet he couldn't bring himself to leave. And after pulling the cover over Spock's quiet length, he positioned himself on the chair by the bed once more, his head resting easily on one graceful alien hand.



## CHAPTER 14

# REPRIEVE

McCoy awakened suddenly, guiltily, and lurched erect to peer uncertainly at the chronometer near the bed.

"Four hours!" He'd slept for four full hours!

Wobbling unsteadily, he'd swung his feet over the edge of the bed and groped for his boots, swearing softly to himself as he contemplated chewing out the duty watch in Sick Bay. He had asked not to be disturbed, but even Chapel must have wondered why he hadn't reported in for the second watch, a religious routine he'd insisted upon since the beginning of his assignment to Starfleet.

Not that he sanctioned incompetents in his department, far from it. He'd insisted on only the most qualified personnel able to continue under the most adverse conditions without his continual guidance. But he'd never deviated from his own rigid pattern unless the ship were under battle conditions or shore leave relaxations. And this situation certainly fit into none of those.

The admissions nurse blinked sleepily at him as he requested the watch summary, and he snapped at her unnecessarily.

"Why wasn't I awakened at the usual time?"

"Dr. Chapel said you needed rest and not to bother you. And the captain hasn't come out yet --."

"You mean he's still in there?!" McCoy gasped incredulously at the chastised ensign and turned on his heel abruptly in the direction of the locked treatment room. At his gruff command the doors slid open.

The room was still in semi-darkness as he'd left it, and it took a moment or two before his eyes adjusted to the softly diffused lighting. Kirk slept peacefully with his head on the edge of the bed, soft snores accentuating the stillness of the place. McCoy tiptoed into the room noiselessly, pausing apprehensively at the partially shrouded form expecting to see the darkened countenance of death. But faint eye movements and softly flushed skin tones greeted his astonished glance as he snapped on a tiny overhead light, and he reached quickly to lift one eyelid for pupil reaction. Suppressing an exclamation of disbelief, he pressed an ear to Spock's upper abdomen.

The strong, steady trip-hammer of the Vulcan heart beat insistently against the human eardrum and McCoy's shout fractured the silence of the



area with imperative commands as he showered the room with light.

"Ensign, call Dr. Chapel and then get in here on the double!"

Minutes later more technicians materialized to reconnect the Vulcan to intravenous solutions and life support equipment; a startled Christine Chapel, her eyes puffy from hours of unsuccessfully checked tears, clung tremulously to the equipment rack just inside the door, the misery fading from her face into hopeful optimism.

A half-asleep Kirk had been pulled unceremoniously away from the bed as the room filled with people, and McCoy finally turned his attention towards his captain. He shook him gently, the words tumbling out almost incoherently as the jubilant doctor attempted to tell Kirk the news.

"Jim, Spock is alive! Do you hear me? He's alive, I tell you!" And he grinned and nodded at the startled, sleep-creased face. The captain blinked vacantly, his eyes squinting against the bright lights flooding the room, and he turned to peer over at the bed where Spock lay half-hidden by the attendants ministering to him. Alerted at last to the activity around him, Kirk turned back to the smiling chief surgeon for confirmation.

"Bones, how...what happened? He was disconnected!"

McCoy couldn't answer right away, and he hugged the other officer unabashedly, his eyes glistening with relief and awe.

"Unfortunately, Jim," he said finally, "I don't understand it myself. But he's alive, and he's going to make it this time, I just know it." He drew back then to clasp the swaying captain by the shoulders, eyeing him conscientiously to confirm nonexistent signs of shock or dizziness. Satisfied as to the other's salubrity he went on about the Vulcan.

"His readings are strong now, even stronger than when we initially beamed him aboard. And his eyes are responding to light -- he's back, Jim -- I don't know how or why, but he's back!" And he hugged Kirk again, oblivious to the watching Chapel and the scurrying medics.

The wide-awake captain was anxious to see for himself, however, and he freed himself at last to move over to the bedside. Spock's chest heaved easily with deep respirations, and at a request, the long, slender hands flexed voluntarily. Another suggestion brought the eyelids up and the dark eyes followed the path of a tiny light which was manipulated by a painstakingly gentle technician.

"He's coming out of it now and he'll be in good hands for a while. We have to talk...." and reverting to professionalism, McCoy steered the mildly protesting starship captain into his office and onto the couch.

"You still have some sleep to catch up on, Captain; it's been weeks since you've had a full night's sleep in your own bed. But first I'd like to know what happened in there while you were with him. Did you notice any change after I left?"

Kirk closed his eyes serenely, the excitement of the past few moments wearing off into an aftermath of lethargy.

"Nothing happened, Bones, I just...sat with him until I fell asleep."

"Did you move him, Jim? Was there any indication that he might have been reviving before you fell asleep?"

McCoy wouldn't be satisfied until he had all the facts, Kirk mused to himself sleepily. But how could he explain something that he didn't understand himself? A pious man had once written that the power of prayer was indeed effective. Kirk didn't take much stock in such notions, even though he remembered appealing to someone...to something...to spare Spock. Bones was a religious man on occasion, but he doubted even the unsophisticated doctor would believe....



No, whatever had happened in that room was between Spock and himself, an unexplained phenomenon. Besides, no one ever knew for sure how such things happened.

"I slept, Bones; and I dreamed; and I shed lots of tears. That's all I can tell you for now." Kirk yawned drowsily. "Maybe Spock can answer your questions when he is fully recovered. Right now I think we both need some uninterrupted rest and privacy...I'd nearly forgotten how comfortable this couch is," he murmured contentedly.

McCoy kept Spock under his wing irretrievably for a week. But eventually his patient required exercise, and reluctantly, the doctor conceded enough freedom to include the level of the first officer's own quarters and that of his captain. Kirk found him waiting outside his door after a late bridge watch, and with a welcome smile, ushered his visitor into the cramped captain's lounge. The human excused himself briefly to shower and change, and returned to greet his old friend in robe and slippers. Spock eyed him uncertainly, poised to leave, but Kirk waved aside his doubt and settled himself in a deep chair.

"Just getting comfortable, Spock, it was a long, boring watch. You look as if you want to talk, or would you prefer a quick game of chess?"

The trace of a puzzled frown flickered across the Vulcan's face in response to Kirk's invitation.

"Captain, our games of chess have never been expeditious," he intoned indignantly, much to Kirk's amusement.

At least he hasn't lost his sense of humor, the human allowed cheerfully to himself.

"But I did come here to talk," the former first officer continued. He paused to scan the room with interest. "It's very like the old Enterprise, Captain, which is most interesting. The Corona is of a different class if I understand correctly; compact, faster, and with a smaller crew. Yet the layout of the interior seems very familiar."

"Almost like home?" Kirk finished softly. The ship served the same purpose as had the other, patrolling, exploring and defending Federation boundaries. But the Corona would never be home to him. "The Enterprise is still in drydock and they're using her for spare parts the last I heard," he explained ruefully. "But it's possible she may be recommissioned as an experimental ship for new trainees."

The starship captain sighed almost disconsolately. "The Enterprise was a first, Spock, a prototype. And Starfleet may decide that it's time to retire her. I hope I'm not around when they do."

"There will always be an Enterprise, Captain," Spock observed quietly. "I feel certain of that. She is part of a tradition of too many military services. Perhaps one day..." he broke off uneasily, suddenly remembering why he'd come to Kirk's quarters. The two officers sat in thought for several moments until Spock mustered the effort to speak. Kirk studied the tired lines around the other's eyes and immediately suspected that more than slow recuperation was responsible for the Vulcan's subtle distress.

"Captain, in considering my future I reasoned that I should consult you before making any definite decisions as to my placement." He cleared his throat nervously and removed a small pillow that had bunched up against the small of his back uncomfortably. With no loss of dignity, and preliminaries having been properly dispensed with, he settled back to regard Kirk gravely.

"I realize it would be difficult to return to our old association, especially after...such a long passage of time."



"The only difficulty I'm having at present is figuring out how to arrange for reinstatement of my first officer without stepping on anyone's official toes." This time Kirk didn't hold back the smile; Spock shook his head somberly, unaffected by the humor in Kirk's tone and unwilling to enter into the lighthearted mood that Kirk sought so pointedly.

"Nevertheless, during the past week I have noticed that something else is troubling you, Jim. I waited until we could discuss it in private rather than broaching the subject in the open-earred environs of Sick Bay."

"Troubling me! There's nothing...." Mollified, Kirk looked away as Spock's left eyebrow began its upward climb. It had been so long since he'd been subjected to the Vulcan's tendency to "read" him that he suddenly found it very unsettling. But denial of pent-up feelings would serve no purpose in re-establishing his relationship with Spock.

"You're right, Spock," he conceded. "There is something bothering me. And I think you have a pretty good idea what it is." He rubbed his forehead weakly as he felt his firm resolve to be "logical" slip disastrously.

Spock's unprecedented revival had left his pat analysis of the former first officer's alien nature badly shaken. He was well acquainted with Spock's ability to successfully induce healing trances in order to recover from various types of physical and mental illnesses. However, he had been unable to understand why it hadn't worked routinely in the most recent instance. There was no doubting the fact that his return from near death had been much more than simple alien technique; in any case, Kirk had mentally debated the right of a mere human to question the intricacies of the Vulcan mind. The mystery of what had happened in Treatment Room One haunted him, but he could not bring himself to demand that the former first officer explain this inconsistency if he did not voluntarily desire to do so.

"Jim." The quiet prompting summoned him back to the Vulcan's perusal, and instinctively, hazel eyes locked with dark brown ones. The closeness that had once held them in loose accord suddenly magnified to fill the room with tactile awareness. Kirk blanched inwardly against the weighty appraisal emanating from the alien's gaze, and with growing consternation lowered his eyes -- but not before he'd seen a shadow of doubt cross the other's face.

"I heard you calling to me and I had to return."

The words were spoken flatly, without emotion, and Kirk fought down the wild impulse to flee from the room into another reality of laughter and frivolously bantering humans.

"I could not leave," the soft voice continued, "because you said you needed me. And I could not ignore that need...."

Kirk exploded from his chair to march swiftly to the concealed buffet at the other side of the room. With shaking hands he poured two glasses of brandy and in passing one to the Vulcan jumped imperceptibly when long, alien fingers brushed his own.

Spock sipped his brandy appreciatively, unperturbed by the human's interruption; and he watched with mild interest as the captain bolted his drink hurriedly and immediately poured another. The air of affiliation had become charged. Kirk squared his shoulders resolutely, leaning against the bulkhead momentarily to regain his composure. But he drained his second glassful and poured a third before returning to his chair, smiling crookedly at the impassive Vulcan.

"Your impressions were correct, Mr. Spock," he said slowly. "I do need you, very much. Confessions have always been painful for me," he sighed. "And this one will be no different. But I suspect the past three years have been almost as educational for you as they were for me." He



leaned forward to inhale his brandy absently, resting the glass against his lips as he considered the memory of a disabled starship.

"It has been said that confessions are good for the soul, Jim." The Vulcan's subtle encouragement evoked a mirthless smile from the other.

"I guess I'm about due for some soul-searching at that," Kirk agreed slowly. "Perhaps it's time to get some things off my chest...heavy stuff that I've been carrying around ever since...."

Spock sat gravely inspecting his brandy glass, and Kirk felt some semblance of his old confidence return at the Vulcan's stoic demeanor. He took a deep breath and lowered his head.

"My quest for truth has always been for somebody else's benefit, Spock, never for my own. It took some personal loss for me to realize that I have been living a lie for so many years." He glanced up at the Vulcan's puzzled scrutiny. "I have been referred to as a god...a brave leader...a brilliant strategist, and a self-reliant warrior. I am none of those, and the past several years have readily affirmed that fact! I'm just another lonely starship captain trying to preserve my ship and my crew as best I can while I carry out my orders. However, three years ago, I was unable to do even that much." Kirk's hands tightened around his brandy glass while Spock pondered the tense words. Nonetheless, the former first officer could offer no more than a friend's sympathetic silence.

"Bones understood -- he's probably the only one who did -- and I don't know what I'd have done without him these many months. But I need your understanding, too."

"Jim," Spock interrupted, his concern over the human's self-recrimination overriding the growing desire to bare his own soul. "We have been associates for a long time and have served together through all measures of adversity. I attribute our ability to emerge intact to your expertise, along with the recognized necessity of combining forces to deal with the difficulties we encounter. I have observed you in every kind of conflict, Captain," he reassured Kirk softly, "and can assure you that you are every bit the man that others would emulate."

"For God's sake, Spock, I lost my ship!" Kirk stared at his friend in agonized humility. "And I almost lost you," he finished quietly.

The Vulcan sighed philosophically. "There is no disgrace in being outnumbered and subjected to odds beyond your ability to counteract. Be that as it may, the Klingons underestimated our ship and the tenacity of our will to live. And I believe we were even fortunate in respect to a bit of 'luck' as well!" He frowned thoughtfully.

There's not a resentful bone in his body, Kirk brooded sorrowfully, his friend's attempt at consolation filling him with hot shame. And feeling renewed loss, he sank even deeper into self-pity.

Unable to endorse the human's compulsion for self-reproach, Spock shook his head and replaced his glass carefully on the table between them. "Captain, I also recall that frequently we were required to face death. And in every instance you were neither hesitant nor foolhardy, maintaining command admirably and efficiently. I think that type of behavior is defined by the word courage, and your courage was the prime example of leadership to your crew."

He responded patiently to his captain's stubborn silence. "I've never mentioned it before, but at no time did I ever experience any hesitation in following your direction into hazards promising to be both dangerous and unpredictable, preferring death with you to life without...."

The supportive words dwindled off uncertainly.

Startled, Kirk stirred from his funk cautiously at the other's atypical confession. Spock was not in the habit of confiding his feelings in human fashion! His formally correct alien heritage had always influenced their exchanges, the occasionally glimpsed human element acknowledged only as a burdensome weakness in his otherwise stoic self-control. For Spock to have revealed himself concisely was an expression of unprecedented trust that his captain had not had to deal with before.

Where was the painfully reticent being he'd come to accept and, intermittently, understand! There was an almost pathetic defenselessness about him now as he sat stiffly on the plump comfort of Kirk's couch. And as the characteristically rising eyebrow refracted the Earthman's secret ruminations, Kirk nodded wistfully at his friend.

"It works both ways, doesn't it, Spock?"

A new anxiety had kindled in the Vulcan. The human was particularly vulnerable in his present state of mind and further disclosures might render him indisposed. But Spock had never shirked responsibility.

"Captain, there is something I must tell you. It is of great significance and of a very private nature. And you may also find it...slightly distasteful."

Confessions seem to be the order of the day, Kirk thought soberly, eyeing his guest cautiously. Yet he suddenly felt reassured that all was well, and that something deep inside himself had anticipated this reciprocity since he'd first knelt beside the other on that rocky asteroid. Then, just for an instant, he'd felt a mixture of relief and foreboding that bore no exact definitive interpretation. And much later, in Sick Bay, he'd shielded his dying friend jealously against the lurking privation of death; immersed in emotional insanity, he'd demanded reprieve, unwilling to relinquish Spock to the other side.

Spock's voice intruded eerily on his thoughts.

"Jim," he began again, "we share an empathy!"

The human shuddered mentally against the other's watchful probing as almost impulsively, the Vulcan hastened to explain.

"I have known about it for some time but never dared verification of it until now. Acknowledgement may help to restore some of your self-confidence, Captain," he offered hopefully.

Kirk gulped at his brandy nervously, unable to face the alien's persistent attempt to comfort him. But his former first officer's solicitous intimation had distracted him only momentarily from overwhelming depression. And he drew deeper into himself, seeking the numbing insulation of solitude that had sustained him for three years, the alcohol merely muffling the import of Spock's quiet discourse.

"...and I believe the association developed over the years as a direct result of our close proximity plus the fact that we shared more than one melding of minds. It was not my intention to involve you so profoundly, Captain," he went on slowly. "Had I foreseen the danger of its existence --"

"I daresay the circumstances did not warrant caution if I recall them exactly, Spock," Kirk ventured fuzzily, surfacing for the moment.

"Nevertheless, as your subordinate, I was unable to inform you of my suspicions in case the knowledge might endanger your life or that of the crew. Therefore, I kept it to myself until I could evaluate the situation more closely." he paused to sip his drink nervously.

"During the past week in Sick Bay I came to understand just how extensive the involvement had become." Grasping false courage grimly, he drained the contents of his glass in one gulp, waving away Kirk's impulse to refill it. Shivering as the brandy burned through his last reserve, he

leaned forward intently, his eyes pinning the human to his chair.

"Jim," he breathed anxiously, "there is a link between our minds. It is a forging of such power that I felt the influence of it clear across the galaxy!"

Kirk felt the flesh on the back of his neck contract involuntarily and he recoiled instinctively from his friend's halting account. The Vulcan's voice had dropped to a husky whisper as he continued.

"I didn't understand it at first and tried to reject it in my disordered mental state, believing it to emanate from another. Yet I sensed a certain compulsion towards a destiny I could not fully comprehend -- as if my journey had been preordained."

Kirk had drawn back imperceptibly, staring at his guest woodenly as his body sought the warm familiarity of his favorite chair. Spock went on almost automatically, as though the words were being forced from him.

"Because of the existence of the primary link, even while unaware of it, you were able to literally recall me from the threshold of death."

The human frowned disconcertedly. His visitor had risen, visibly disturbed, to clasp his hands behind his back in a hauntingly familiar stance.

"I am now fully convinced, Jim," Spock closed his eyes defensively against the other's disbelief, "that just as surely as the affiliation of our subconscious faculties led me to pursue vengeance against those I believed had destroyed you, the force of it also led you across the galaxy in search of me. Quiescent at times, it nevertheless becomes strongest when we are separated by great distance...or great danger." He held up a hand to quiet Kirk's feeble protest.

"Hear me out, Captain. The evidence has been obvious for many years; I was merely unable to recognize the subtle presence of the bond. I surmise further that the trauma of catastrophe and separation must have implemented the force at peak strength. It brought both of us to that tiny asteroid...."

Spock had turned away from Kirk to stare down at his hands as though he'd never looked at them before.

"I killed, Jim, with my bare hands; I actually took life that was not mine to take." He shuddered sadly, his hands hanging limply at his sides. "However, in choosing death for myself in retribution, I nearly failed to realize that I would take you with me!"

The significance of the other's words were not lost on Kirk as he withdrew abruptly from his own brooding to watch Spock's struggle for control. The fact that his friend also labored under a tremendous guilt bothered Kirk. He had been unloading his own shortcomings on the Vulcan's shoulders only to discover an even deeper suffering underlying an alien restraint. And just for a moment he glimpsed his friend's anguished turmoil over the alternative of death to facing the enormity of his actions while under Klingon dominance.

His eyes hooded against barely checked emotions, Spock perched tentatively on the edge of the couch. The tension in the room had heightened, and Kirk felt small tremors of anxiety tightening the muscles of his chest. But the Vulcan resumed contemplation out loud.

"This suggests many possibilities for the future, Jim. Despite the many comforting aspects of this relationship between us, I must also warn you of its distinctly dangerous disadvantages -- ."

"Dangerous?" Kirk inquired loftily, the effects of his recent penchant for brandy evident in the flippancy of his tone. The Vulcan lapsed into disconcerted silence as though weighing the merits of his reply.

"I can teach you elementary mind shielding so that each of us can maintain personal privacy." He paused again momentarily in reflection of his

captain's curious habit of indulging in female pursuit, which he would, no doubt, find tedious if forced to endure the resulting sensations through the channel.

"In order to keep ourselves 'unique' so that we can function normally and without distraction," he explained, "there are various techniques that can be employed to permit us to think and perform independently while, at the same time, retaining a tenuous link that can be useful in compromising situations --."

"Get to the point, Spock," Kirk interrupted levelly. "You said the connection could be dangerous. What do you mean: dangerous?"

Spock sighed and lifted his gaze to the other's frown.

"If we use the link during a fatal crisis such as one of us being irreparably injured, the other can be induced into the finality of death also. In order for the uninjured one to survive, both must be conscious and willing to break the link simultaneously." He nodded at Kirk's wide-eyed comprehension. "If I had not become aware of the danger when I 'felt' your entreaty, Jim, I might have drawn you along with me...."

The human expelled the long breath he'd been holding and shook his head in wonder. "It must be an unusually strong force if what you say is true, Spock."

"Extremely powerful," Spock concurred. "And there are documented cases in Vulcan records of bonded members who were unable to prevent the death of the unimpaired partner. I had not believed that the mental capacities of a human could incorporate the full intensity of the effect," he added quietly. "But apparently it is possible in your case."

Kirk rose to pace the room, hugging himself defensively as though trying to deny the invasion of unseen vibrations around him. Spock seemed to sense his companion's apprehension and sought to reassure him again.

"If the prospects of bearing the responsibilities of the link are too difficult for you, we can summon a Vulcan priest to perform a dissolution through a special --."

"No, Spock," Kirk replied pensively. "If the link was responsible for saving your life then it must be regarded as a most beneficial entity. And not to be treated lightly." He swallowed carefully, eyeing the Vulcan gravely. "There is nothing I wouldn't do to help you, Spock, you know that. And you must also know by now that you have assumed a most important place in my life. When I lost my only brother --."

"Jim, it is not necessary --."

"Let me finish, Spock. When I lost Sam, I felt cut off from the rest of humanity, so to speak. We had been very close, although he was several years older than I. He was my idol as a young boy and I tried to emulate him in everything he did, even to following his footsteps into space. But we were undeniably different, just as you and I are different...." Kirk looked away but not before Spock had seen the pain of resurrected memories.

Unspoken words lay between them, and Spock rose finally, uncomfortably, his stoic facade slipping back into place instinctively. He'd said what had to be said and now it was time to return to Sick Bay.

Kirk turned to follow him to the door, and at the last moment touched the tall, spare figure gently on the shoulder. "We have much time, my Vulcan friend, to discuss this matter in greater detail. Perhaps when you are feeling stronger, when we are back on the Enterprise," he smiled wistfully, "if we ever get her back." The starship captain shook his head ruefully at his silent companion. "Besides, this opens new potentials to our chess games, Spock. A contest of matching shields...think about it!"

One Vulcan eyebrow climbed slowly to the hairline as the challenge sank



in, and for a moment there was the ghost of a delighted smile on the wan alien face.

"Indeed, Captain, that would be most...interesting...."

## CHAPTER 15

# THE PROPHECY

Spock's recovery promised to be complete and inclusive due to McCoy's adamant supervision. The Chief Medical Officer scheduled him for repair surgery as soon as he judged the Vulcan strong enough to withstand prolonged anesthesia. Attendants at the operation testified later that McCoy had threatened Spock with court-martial if the reticent alien didn't cooperate fully.

Through it all, Kirk maintained a barely concealed relish. The transfer of Lieutenant Sandler to a passing Starfleet express liner for passage back to Earth and his new assignment seemed to lighten the captain's mood even moreso, although no one was brave enough to venture an opinion on the matter.

Starfleet issued an officially worded "Well done!" but Kirk felt certain that there were many others in significant positions who were rejoicing silently at the satisfactory outcome of the long crusade. And as quiet messages of congratulations began arriving via private channels, Kirk conveyed them diligently to the steadily recuperating first officer.

At first, Kirk spent every waking hour over and above his obligatory bridge duty in Sick Bay, reassuring his friend that he would be fully reinstated to active duty as soon as he was pronounced medically fit. And McCoy, just as adamantly, insisted on withholding that certification until he could return the Vulcan to his former perfect health.

In the intervening weeks Kirk managed to extract the facts of Spock's three year absence, secretly relieved to find his friend almost eager to discuss the nightmarish ordeal. The amicable relationship with his Klingon subordinates aboard the Emptor as well as confirmation of a developing Klingon civil uprising were rewarding details; pertinent information which Kirk promptly forwarded to Starfleet. Federation acknowledgement seemed anti-climactic except for the postscript from Nogura ordering Spock to report for a special merit award ceremony upon his return to Earth.

McCoy's release of his patient to active duty was first priority however, and Spock's insistent accusations of a power-hungry, non-regulation medic interfering in the performance of a superior officer's responsibilities finally resulted in premature release -- a full week before McCoy had intended. Kirk's amused preoccupation of the grumbling rapport between his two closest

friends was a comforting return to normal until he was reminded of the mortally wounded Enterprise, and the loss of so many valuable crew people. The ambush would never be entirely forgotten by those who had been there. Nonetheless, with the possibility of eased Klingon foreign policy tensions, intergalactic relations might eventually settle into an easy ambience, the underhanded confrontation paling into the pages of history.

Spock's resurrection remained a mystery to McCoy. Since the Vulcan seemed loath to discuss what was believed to be the turning point, citing the doctor's cross-examinations to be an invasion of his privacy, the chief medical officer was forced to enter the incident in his log simply as unexplained. McCoy's own discreet notions as to what had actually had happened in that darkened treatment room remained undisclosed because neither Kirk nor Spock would affirm or deny the doctor's specualtions. And the subject seemed ended when the formally reinstated first officer resumed his duties at the science station.

New orders to divert to an adjacent star system reached the Corona shortly after they'd re-entered Federation space. The recent discovery of a black star formation had initiated the need for a ship in that sector to study the magnitude of the awesome phenomenon; and since the message had arrived just as the watch was changing, Kirk and Spock elected to review Starfleet's demands in Kirk's quarters.

It was to have been an evening of chess, the captain of the Corona reminded himself as Uhura personally delivered several message tapes of up-dated Starfleet news as well. He glanced resignedly at the pile, and selecting the latest first, nodded at Spock to activate the viewer.

An hour later the tapes had dwindled down to one, and as Kirk flipped it over for identification he smiled wearily and shoved it across to his first officer.

"It's yours, Spock: Eyes Only, Personal, Spock, Lt. Cdr. USS Corona, Top Priority!"

The Vulcan stared at it uncomprehendingly, his mouth pressed into a thin line of doubt. When he made no move to claim it Kirk rose to his feet apologetically.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Spock, perhaps you would prefer some privacy -- ."

"That will not be necessary, Captain," objected his second in command, waving him back to his seat.

Silence.

"You will find out what it's about if you play it," Kirk pointed out gently when he could no longer stand the suspense. Spock glanced up into the amused eyes of his commander and blinked in compliance, slipping the thin metal communique into the viewer slot.

"Attention: FEV 801, USS CORONA, From: LIBERATION TRIBUNAL OF THE NEW KLINGON EMPIRE. Greetings of peace and long life to our friend and brother! We have only just learned of your survival and wished you to be the first on your ship to learn of establishment of the new ruling government. The coup was successful with very little loss of life, and sweeping changes are now being executed throughout the environs of Klingon influence.

"We are also pleased to inform you that the Romulans have reconsidered their original stand of isolation and have agreed to meet at the treaty table with us when we join Federation officials for formal talks. We would welcome your presence, Spock, as a friend of the Klingon people, and as an important member of the Federation as well. We look forward to seeing you again and

extend the invitation to visit Khaz whenever possible. We think you will be pleased to see the improvements that have come about recently.

"Our gratitude for your part in assisting the revolution cannot be properly expressed in the coldness of an inter-galactic dispatch, but it is with eternal friendship that we shall remember your sojourn with us in the pursuit of a new world for all. May your gods continue to watch over you and your family. Peace."

And the names Klyntee, Kahlor, and Kotaan appeared just above the emblem of clasped hands over a broken sword.

The viewer went blank and silence took over the room once more. Kirk stirred almost hesitantly.

"Vengeance has a way of backfiring, my friend. But I would say that in this case it has done so most beneficially?" He looked away from the carefully composed face opposite him and in that instant another face filled his mind, another voice repeating words from the past.

"...in the future you and the Klingons will become fast friends. You will work together in great harmony..."

Kirk realized that he'd almost forgotten the Organian prophecy. Was this really the end of war...or just another beginning?



### THE HUMANS

Galactic white knight  
with dark sandy hair  
Dying,  
In mute, self-reproaching despair;  
Grief-stricken eyes  
reflecting blank stare,  
Withdrawn  
To an old friend's benevolent care...  
Dark-haired doctor  
with keen glare of blue,  
Baffled  
By every inscrutable clue...  
Outraged frustration  
Will plague these two,  
Devotedly  
Bound to avenge the coup...

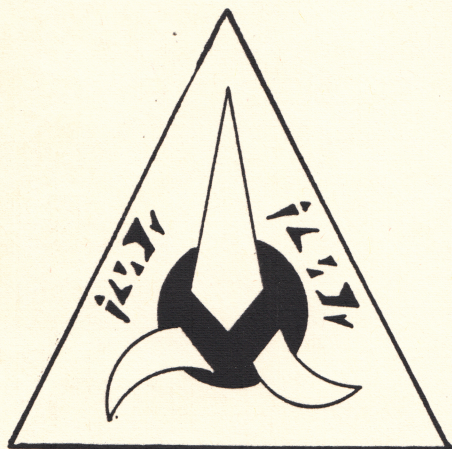
### THE VULCAN

Alien            Changeling  
Aloof  
Alone  
His past imperiled  
Probed  
Unknown,  
The Vulcan endured  
Conspired, on his own...  
Old comrades gone,  
New soulmates won,  
He schemed from a tenuous  
Bastion  
An ill-fated vengeance favoring  
None  
Save death,  
When the contest was done...  
Immortality balanced uncertainly,  
He paused  
On the brink of eternity...

### THE KLINGON

Spawned in a maelstrom of Hell's  
Regime  
Remorseless master,  
Ruthless fiend  
Assaulted...conquered,  
Plundered...dreamed  
Premeditated evil scheme.  
Predestination intervened,  
Rescinding foul, malignant scene  
To stalk the stalker  
As he plotted  
Unrepentent  
Unredeemed...





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